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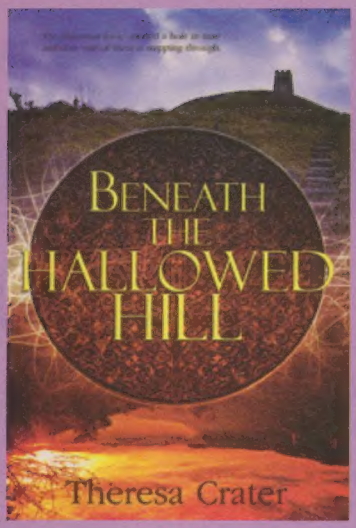


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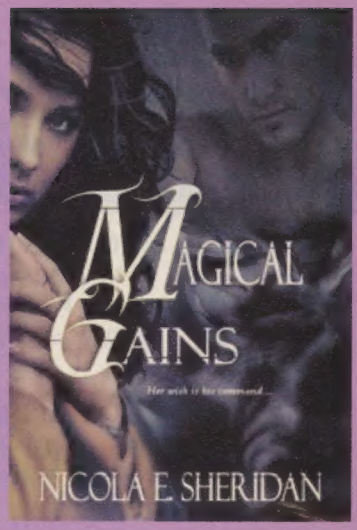


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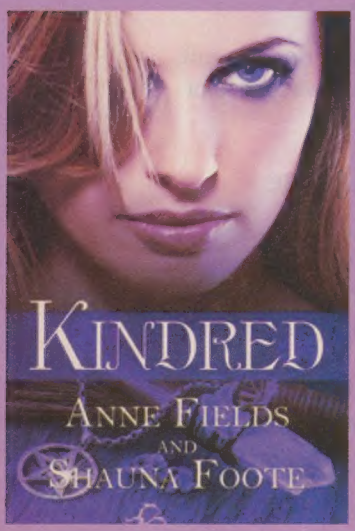


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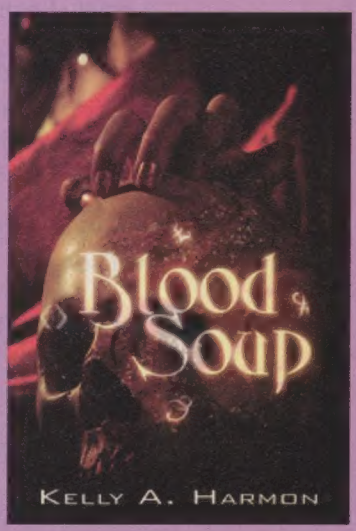


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## Columns


6 Movies
*by Resa Nelson*
*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows—Part 2*

12 Artists Gallery
*by Mia Nutick*
Women in Fantasy: The Images, the Artists

18 Folkroots
*by Theodora Goss*
A Brief History of Monsters

68 Books
*by Paul Witcover & Elizabeth Bear*
*The Company Man*
*The Enterprise of Death*
*Mechanique*
*The River of Shadows*
*Wolfsangel*

76 Paranormal Romance & Urban Fantasy
*by Elizabeth Bear*
*Akata Witch*
*Jim and the Flims*

78 Young Adult Fiction
*by Michael M. Jones*
*Always a Witch*
*Born at Midnight*
*Huntress*
*Eona*
*Queen of the Dead*
*Red Glove*
*Supernaturally*
*The Girl in the Steel Corset*
*The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*

80 Graphic Novels
*by Andrew Wheeler*
*Lost & Found: Three by Shaun Tan*
*Anya's Ghost*

82 Gaming Reviews
*by Matt London & Matt Staggs*
*Black Bag Jobs*
*Portal 2*
*Red Tide*
*The Mutant Epoch*


## Fiction


26 The Progress of Solstice and Chance
*by Richard Bowes*
The lives of the gods are not like ours. They're much, much longer...

32 Isabella's Garden
*by Naomi Kritzer*
Gardening is easy—all you need is soil, sun, water, seeds and an awareness of what you're planting.

36 Collateral Damage
*by Kate Riedel*
Which hurts more? To wait for someone who never comes back, or to wait for someone who comes too late?

46 Snake in the Grass
*by W. R. Thompson*
It can take an eternity to figure out your relationship with your parents.

56 Leap of Faith
*by Alan Smale*
If at first you don't succeed, try a pillar of fire, one of salt, and a nice fresh start.


Cover art by Kristina Carroll

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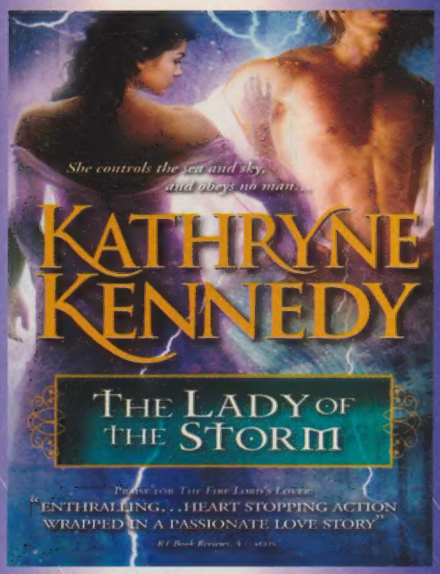
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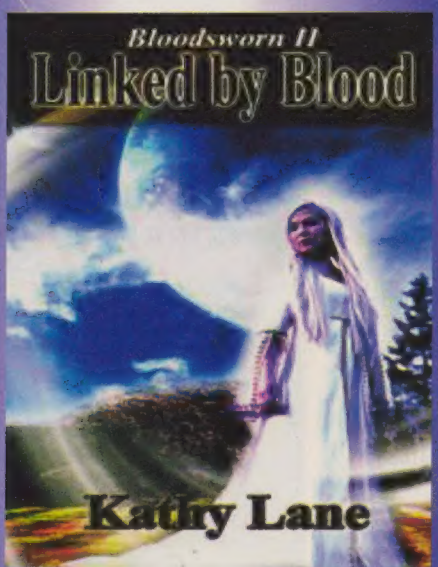


## Linked by Blood

by Kathy Lane

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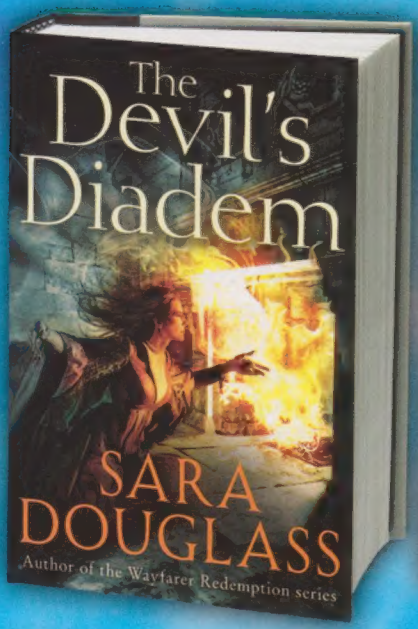


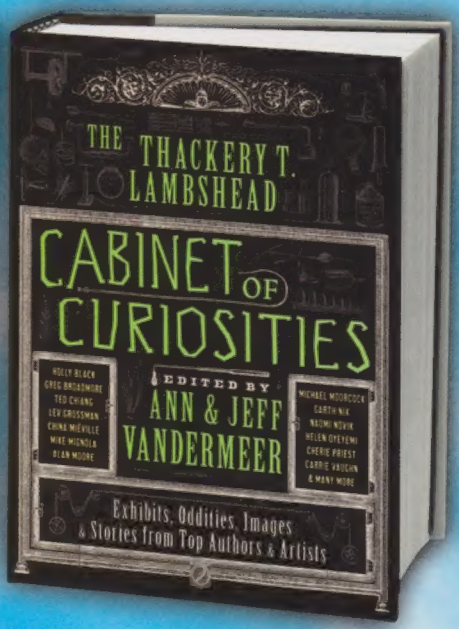
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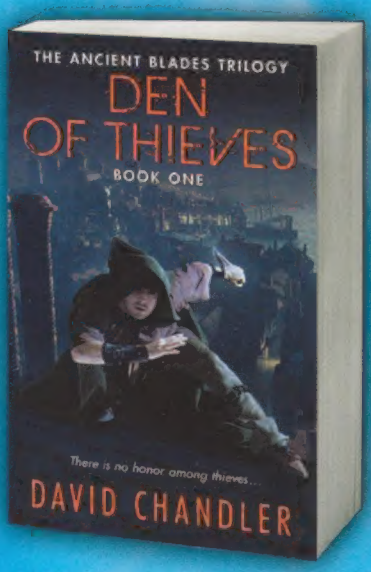


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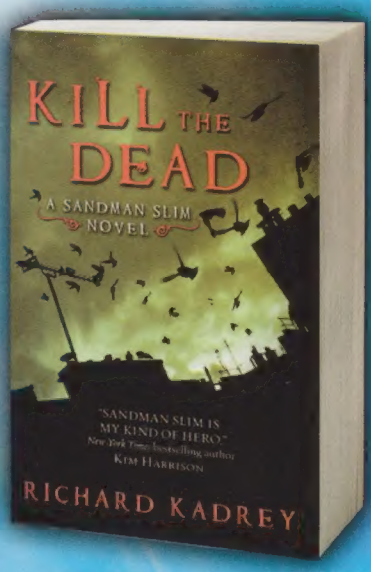


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Movies

# So Long, Harry

by Resa Nelson

After fourteen remarkable years, the Harry Potter empire comes to a close with the Warner Bros. release of the final movie, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*, on July 15. When the first Harry Potter book was published in 1997, no one could have predicted that the series would capture the hearts of children and adults alike all over the world. Initially, the first book was published in Great Britain, where it became a sensation through word of mouth. When the filmmakers made the first Harry Potter movie, they didn't know they'd be making seven more; that all depended on the box office results for the first film. The Harry Potter phenomenon is one that grew slowly but steadily. As in the U.K., the books gained an audience in the United States and abroad because friends told friends. After the first few books in the series became best sellers, bookstores began throwing midnight release parties and encouraged customers to dress as characters from the novels. UPS workers began dreading each release date because it meant they'd be delivering legions of individual copies to home addresses. Readers around the world put everything else aside and locked themselves away to read the newest Harry Potter book as soon as they received it.

Even people who haven't read the books flocked to theaters to see the movie version of each novel. In February the British Academy of Film and Television recognized the Harry Potter movie franchise with its Outstanding British Contribution to Cinema award.

What are we going to do without Harry?

Producer David Heyman talks about how his world is changing as the end draws near. "It's with mixed feelings. One of the incredible things about this journey is the family. It sounds really corny, but many of the people have grown up [on the Harry Potter set]. This is the only film they have worked on. If it isn't, it is most certainly what has dominated our lives. Many people have been with us since the beginning. Some started with the second or third film, but there is tremendous continuity. We've had babies born. We've had people die. We've had marriages, we've had divorces, we've had fights and romances and discoveries, and virginity lost and people maybe having sex for the last time. We've had the whole cycle of life on these films, and I think that we're incredibly close.

"It's a very comfortable place to work because it's a place in which there is great pride but no ego. Nobody here feels arrogant. It's going to be weird to let that go. Normally, you're with people on a shoot for eight weeks, ten weeks. On a long film, maybe fifteen weeks. We've been doing it for ten years, so that's going to be weird."

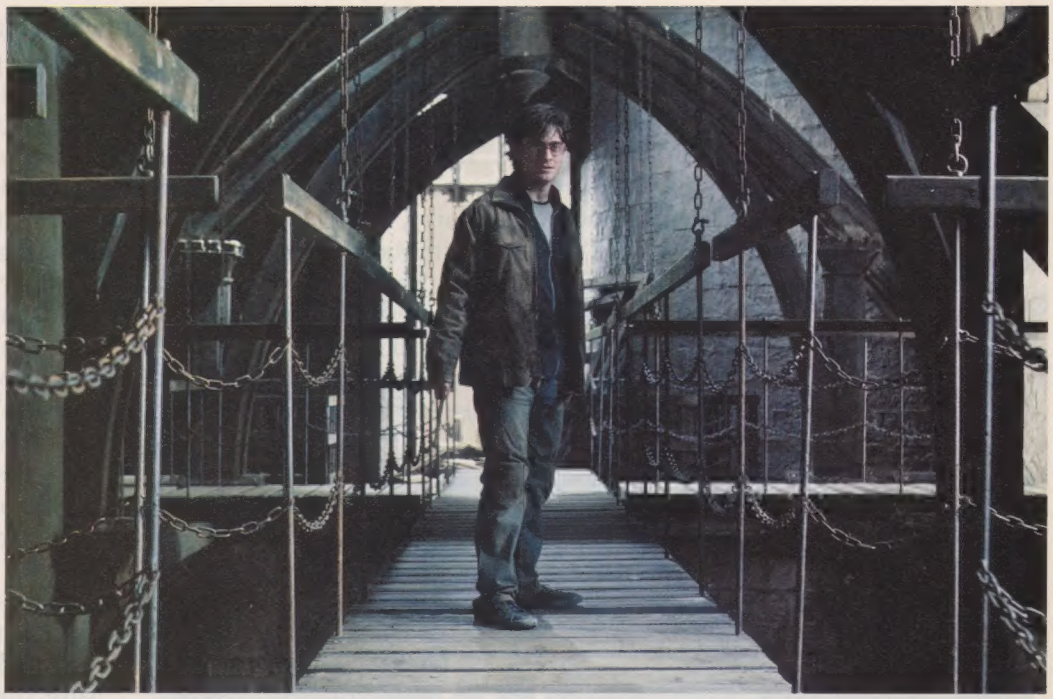
One of the great benefits for the people working on the Harry Potter films has been job security, thanks to an enormous and devoted fan base. "That's a gift," Heyman says. "And also to have Jo Rowling's material, the biggest gift of all. But at the same time, I'm really looking forward to the new challenges ahead."

On a visit to the Harry Potter set during the filming of *Deathly Hallows* (both parts were filmed in one long shoot), actors and filmmakers echoed Heyman's sentiments. The filmmakers described Part One as a "road movie" because Harry, Hermione, and Ron spend most of the story on the run as they struggle to keep their distance from Lord Voldemort and his followers. They describe Part Two as the

*(L-r) DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter, EMMA WATSON as Hermione Granger and RUPERT GRINT as Ron Weasley in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART 2," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk*

final battle, and one of the sets shows it. The beautiful Great Hall with its lovely York stone floor is in shambles. A sense of mayhem and destruction hovers in the air. The Hogwarts sets no longer feel homey and cozy as they have in the past. They now feel like a familiar friend teetering on the precipice of death.

"In film two, we're captured and it's the escape and we move onto the battle stuff and get right in there with all the fighting," says Rupert Grint, who plays Ron Weasley. "I'm really enjoying it. It's been a really different experience."



*DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART 2," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk*

The Harry Potter series culminates with revelations about Lord Voldemort, carefully foreshadowed in earlier books and movies. Harry has already learned that Voldemort split his soul and placed pieces of it in everyday objects, known as Horcruxes. In the previous film, Harry learned the fairy-tale-like story of the Deathly Hallows: three brothers met Death, who granted a gift to each. These gifts included the Cloak of Invisibility (which Harry inherited from his father), the Stone of Resurrection, and the Elder Wand. Collectively, they are known as the Deathly Hallows, and anyone who owns all three is invincible. In Part One, Harry faced the choice of continuing his search for the remaining Horcruxes or beginning a new search for the Deathly Hallows, and he chose the Horcruxes. At the end of that film, we saw Lord Voldemort dig up the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's grave. So while Harry is pursuing Horcruxes, Voldemort is collecting the Deathly Hallows.

"I think what David Yates is doing, which I think is really important, is he's rooting that final conflict between Harry and Voldemort in very human qualities," Heyman says. "So it's really about the two of them. There is a sequence where Voldemort is beating the sugar out of Harry, and I think that's really interesting. But he's venting everything, all of his frustrations in not having killed this young boy. And then there's the flip side of Harry confronting Voldemort about his failures."

This final movie gives the actors the opportunity to see their characters' journeys through to a satisfying conclusion. Grint talks about his experience reading the final novel and the biggest surprise for his character. "I suppose [the greatest surprise was] the whole romance with Hermione. There's always been something subtly playing between them. In this film they're quite couple-y to the end, so it's quite strange. But I really loved the seventh book. I thought it was really good."

A popular topic in the media has been the kissing sequences between the young actors who have literally grown up together on the Harry Potter set. "Yeah, I was really worried about that," Grint says about kissing Emma Watson, who plays Hermione. "It just felt like it was wrong. But once we were on set, the day-to-day was really good. It was fine. It was fussing about nothing, really. We just did it. It was not many takes. It was over pretty quickly."

Watson adds, "Getting into character to kiss Dan [Radcliffe] and Rupert...forgetting all of our history and our relationship and putting all of that aside and being the character was pretty bloody hard, to be honest. It was really having to be professional and grit my teeth and be like 'I am Hermione. I am the character. Stop thinking that it's Emma kissing Dan. It's not. It's Hermione kissing Harry. It's all good.'

"I do some pretty tough stuff," Watson says when asked about Hermione's greatest moment in the *Deathly Hallows* movies. "There's a scene where Ron gets Splinched and he's essentially bleeding to death in my arms, and Hermione has to keep calm and figure out how to save his life. I'm also tortured by Bellatrix. I did a torture scene, which was the weirdest thing ever. It was like having an out-of-body experience. It's like the most intense thing I've ever done. I think [director] David [Yates] did two different angles on it, and I did a take for each but it went on for

two minutes and it felt like an eternity. It felt like forever."

This Part One scene was in the process of being filmed when *Realms of Fantasy* visited the Harry Potter set. Having already filmed her part, Watson's recorded voice screamed in the background while Harry, Ron, and Luna Lovegood find each other in Malfoy's dungeon-like cellar. In take after take, Evanna Lynch plays Luna as cool and collected, despite Hermione's blood-curdling shrieks. Lynch never flinches. Not once. "She just never gets shocked," Lynch says about Luna. "Because she has always been

***MATTHEW LEWIS as Neville Longbottom in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART 2," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk***

really open-minded. It's not just being open-minded. It's being accepting of everything. Even Dobby appears [in this scene] and she just rolls with it. She's never worried. To me, I think she believes in faith, and whatever happens, she accepts she can't change it."

Although Lynch had little screen time in Part One, Luna Lovegood plays a far more important role in the final film. "Being in [the Hogwarts house of] Ravenclaw, that becomes really significant. Because she knows about the diadem of Ravenclaw, which is one of the Horcruxes that Harry knows nothing about. There's one thing after another and there's so many people and so many things happening. She helps Harry along.

"I think every time Luna comes on, you just forget about the fuss. She's not really in tune with what's going on and what's happening next. She doesn't worry. She's just there.

"We're quite different," Lynch says about the character she plays. "I aspire to be more like her, because I love that she can tune out. I learned a lot from her, because you can't change anything no matter what is going to happen. Sure, people may die and that's really worrying, but getting upset about it will only make it worse. I love how she's adjusted to death. She's more spiritual than the others, and it's not going to ruin her life, thinking about what will happen."

While Luna easily avoids thinking about what will happen, it's something that plays on everyone else's mind. The actors, filmmakers, and crew wonder what their future holds in a post-Harry Potter world. And what will happen to the remnants of the world they so carefully created.

Nick Dudman of the Creature Shop has supervised the design and creation of the non-human (and a few human) entities featured in the Harry Potter films. "I'm sure that this will never happen again," he says about working on the movies. "To be in the same facility—even this leaking old building—for ten years with the opportunity to do something and then a year later do it again and try to improve it, with a decent budget and time, it's just never going to happen again." Dudman pauses for a moment and offers a wry smile. "And we will all need to be rehabilitated, because if somebody asks me to do a rubber nose for a movie, I'm going to be asking for six months time and a crew of forty. I don't know how I'm going to adapt."

About the fate of his Harry Potter creations, Dudman says, "I'd love them to go to a museum. I'd love them to be preserved in some way. What that is, God knows. They haven't told me yet. But I'd love to see them preserved just because lots of very careful work has gone into them."

Producer David Barron talks about the destiny of the Harry Potter movie sets. "It's undecided. Warner has plans to try to exhibit some of them." In fact, a traveling exhibit of the Harry Potter sets, costumes, creatures, and props began a worldwide tour in Boston last year. At press time, the exhibition is currently showing at Discovery Times Square in New York City through September 5. To stay on top of new tour locations and dates, visit http://www.harrypotterexhibition.com on a regular basis because it's common for the site to list only the current venue. (Fans looking for a more hands-on experience always have the option of going to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, the new theme park at Universal in Orlando, to dine

at the Three Broomsticks and shop at Honeydukes in Hogsmeade.)

Barron explains why the filmmakers decided to preserve every Harry Potter set beginning with the first film. "Because of the franchise nature of the project, we've always been where we could pack struck sets, which means you take them apart as carefully as you can so that with a minimum amount of refurbishment you can stand them back up again. There's always quite a lot of work involved to put them back together. But the normal thing, once a set's finished and you've signed off on it, then you literally bulldoze it into a skiff and throw it away on a normal film because it's too expensive to take them down. There's no reclamation value to them. Nobody else wants them because you shot on them so they don't want to. But with these in the beginning, especially because with the early books we had no idea what was coming back, you'd feel a bit of an idiot if you trashed the Leaky Cauldron and found in two books you needed the Leaky Cauldron again."

When asked about plans for a wrap party for the cast and crew when the last movie is complete, Barron says, "We do hope to have a proper party. We haven't had them for the last few films. The crews are so big. There are thousands of people, and actually finding venues is really, really difficult for that number of people. And if you're going to do it, you can't leave people out because it's just not right. We are working on that. You get to the kind of size of group of people where you have to start looking at huge places like [Wembley Stadium]."

During the filming of the last two films Watson had already begun her college career at Brown University. "I've been acting in bits and bobs," she says. "I want to experiment a bit. My commitment to being at university comes back. I can never get this time back again—this time of being at university and learning. That's my main focus. I'm definitely going to look at doing other things." However, at press time, recent news articles have reported that Watson will take a break from her studies to continue acting.

But some of her cast mates have a more decided interest in pursuing other roles. Grint has already starred in a handful of independent movies and hasn't decided whether to remain in the United Kingdom to look for future roles or take the leap to Hollywood. Daniel Radcliffe is starring in the stage play *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* on Broadway.

***DANIEL RADCLIFFE as Harry Potter in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART 2," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk***

Lynch, the former schoolgirl selected from thousands of unknown hopefuls to play Luna, has high hopes about her future in theater and films. "I've learned so much from here. I've grown so much, I think. I used to be so shy, and I think this forced me to commit myself. I've been thinking about this lately. Everyone has to try and understand everyone else and try to be modest. Because when you think you're right, when you're in your own head, how can you accept other people's point of view when you're only in your own head? And that's why I think I love acting, because you have to force yourself to be in someone else's head. And eventually the longer I play Luna, I felt I've learned about her and I take on some of that.

"You have to be really brave to do something else. I used to say to people, 'I'm going to be in the Harry Potter films.' I was really convinced about it. And they'd all just laugh because it just doesn't happen. And now I feel that everyone accepts it. A few weeks ago I went to Cirque du Soleil. I told everyone I was going to be in Cirque du Soleil, and everyone said, 'Yeah, you probably will then.' And when other people believe you, it makes you feel more excited about things."

Although fans may be excited about the final Harry Potter film, many mourn the end of the series. The world waits anxiously to see what Rowling will write next, which has led to a lot of speculation. When asked if he thinks this is truly

the end of Harry Potter, Heyman says, "I don't think Jo will write another book in the Harry Potter series. In a way she viewed it as one story. What I can see her doing [is] maybe *Quidditch Through the Ages* but I haven't spoken to her about it. She's given no indication of it. I could see something like that for charity."

What about the idea of a *Harry Potter, Next Generation*? Heyman doesn't think it would work. "She could [but] I doubt that she would. I won't produce, and I can't imagine someone else doing that."

Most people assume that Rowling can make decisions about Harry Potter with regard to movies, but Warner Bros. holds the film rights. For example, if someone wanted to make an animated version of Harry Potter, that decision would be made by Warner Bros., not by Rowling. Heyman speculates on the possibilities, but keep in mind it's all speculation on his part, and he keeps his tongue planted firmly in cheek. "They may remake them starting in 2012. I really have not got a clue. But absolutely it is possible. [The Harry Potter movies] could be remade, done as animation. But I think it will always be Jo's fiction that is the basis. Might they make the new kids at Hogwarts or the early years? I can't imagine that because Jo didn't initiate it. If she did, sure they'd consider it, but I don't see her doing that. It'll be this fiction that it would be based on. There's probably enough material for five to seven years of syndication." But again, that's all pie in the sky.

When asked if she'll ever watch all the Harry Potter movies back to back and watch herself grow up on them, Watson says, "I don't know. I feel like maybe we should all get together as a group at someone's house and do it and get tons of rubbish food and just sit and watch them all and have a good cry and be nostalgic. I don't think the time is ready yet."

***(L-r) JASON ISAACS as Lucius Malfoy, HELENA BONHAM CARTER as Bellatrix Lestrange and RALPH FIENNES as Lord Voldemort in Warner Bros. Pictures' fantasy adventure "HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART 2," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk***

# Warwick Davis Double Dips in the Deathly Hallows
## by Resa Nelson

Actor Warwick Davis is best known for playing the title role in *Willow*, a 1988 movie that's still popular with children. Over the years he has become an icon in fantasy, horror, and science fiction films. Davis has starred in the six *Leprechaun* horror movies and played roles in *Labyrinth*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and TV's *Merlin*. Harry Potter fans recognize him as Hogwarts's Professor Flitwick (a regular since the first Harry Potter movie), but Davis plays an additional character in the final Harry Potter film: the duplicitous goblin Griphook.

Davis has enjoyed his ongoing role as Flitwick because he sees the character as fun and amusing, pointing out that Flitwick is somewhat close to his own personality. But he jumped at the opportunity to play Griphook, a character at the opposite end of the spectrum from Flitwick and himself. The goblin strikes a deal to help Harry infiltrate Gringotts, the goblin-run bank. But it's dangerous to trust any goblin. As Davis explains, it's like making a deal with the devil. "[Director David Yates] was really thrilled that I was going to be doing this, and equally was I because throughout the films I've had some lovely parts to play. But Griphook... there's just a bit more meat to this character. So that's been really nice to finish on a note like that for me."

But Davis's role in the final Harry Potter film runs deeper than portraying two very different characters. For several years he has run Willow Management, an agency that represents actors who, like Davis, stand less than five feet tall. "I was thrilled when the producers came and said, 'We're planning to go back to Gringotts' again and we'll need 60 goblins,'" Davis says. The producers asked Davis if Willow Management could provide the actors, and he was happy to oblige. "At that point in the process, I didn't know I'd be playing Griphook. We put together 60 actors and they all came in and met with David. And David did some improvisational work with them. Nothing related to goblins. Just to see who they were and which characters they might fit as goblins. He reviewed tapes and decided on his chosen featured goblins and then who would be general goblins to fill Gringotts' hall. That was the easy part.

"The hard work started when you have to do the live casting for 60 actors. You have to stock 60 different makeups, because none of them were generic. These were all uniquely styled goblins with their own features and ultimately their own personalities at the end of the day. I was called in on the day that we shot the Gringotts bank sequence but ironically I was actually invisible at that time because I'm under the Invisibility Cloak in Gringotts with Harry. So I didn't have to be made up that day but was able to witness over 100 makeup artists working away to create 60 goblins. It was a fantastic day."

Because there are so few roles in mainstream films for little people, Davis has made his living working in genre films. But how does he feel about that?

"I feel I belong within the genre field of sci-fi and horror," Davis says. "People often say, 'Oh, don't you get tired of portraying characters in this sort of movie?' I say, 'Well, I'm an actor. And to be given the chance to act is what I love doing.' It's no matter what type of film it's in. If I'm out there performing, that's what I like to do. But at the same time, I really enjoy watching sci-fi and horror genre films. It's pure escapism. For me, I don't want to walk into a movie theater and be reminded of what's going on outside the door. I want to go and be transported into another world. So I'm playing into films I love to watch, as well."

Fans of Davis are probably wondering what the actor will be doing now that the Harry Potter series is ending. "I'm currently writing a book, my autobiography," Davis says. "It's been a very fun experience trying to delve back into the past and recount what went on in my very first project. I'm also developing a comedy series in which I play myself. But it's in the style of Larry David in the sense that I play an alternative version of myself. That's been a very interesting project. There's always a desire for *Leprechaun 7*, believe it or not. I've no idea why, but the fans out there, they just can't get enough of it. A pitch was recently made to Lions Gate for number seven. Who knows? I'd love to get in those buckled shoes again. But it does mean at the same time there is a double-edged sword: I will be back in prosthetic makeups again. But it gives me a chance to perform, which I really love doing."

Another question that fans keep asking Davis: Will there ever be a sequel to his first and possibly most popular starring role? "It's a feature of my comedy series. My character, he keeps mentioning, 'It looks like *Willow 2* is going to happen.' He constantly harks back to the glory days of that and wants to go back. I did mention it to George [Lucas] and Ron [Howard] when they were together a couple of years ago. I said, 'Are you in touch with what's going on out there? That everybody goes on about how they'd love to see more *Willow*.' And they said, 'Well, we did think about it.' And it was actually seriously considered as a TV series for a little while. He said, 'Don't get excited because if we do it, you'll be recast because you're too old.' He said it in that very typical George Lucas dry manner, so I think he was joking."

But Davis adds, "Having played the Leprechaun and Griphook, I've got quite a taste for the more evil characters. It's always much more fun."

# Women in Fantasy: The Images, the Artists

by Mia Nutick

> "Picture a generic urban fantasy cover. The odds are good, unless you were thinking of the *Dresden Files* or the Simon Canderous books, that you pictured a woman in tight pants and a skimpy top, probably looking exotic and dangerous at the same time. She may or may not be holding a knife. If she is, it doesn't really look like it would do all that much damage when used to stab someone, although it might use all of its extra flourishes and points to get stuck on their clothing. Despite being in mortal peril, her hair is perfect, and her makeup is expertly applied. She may or may not bear any resemblance to the woman on the other side of that cover, but by the Great Pumpkin, she is Urban Fantasy Babe, and she will cut you with her richly saturated color palette."
>
> —Seanan McGuire,
> LiveJournal post, 2011

* * * *

Oh yes, Urban Fantasy Babe and her immediate predecessor, the scantily clad though well-muscled and busty Woman Warrior, the two images which come to mind so readily when discussing the portrayal of the feminine in fantasy art.

***Tori's Song***
**by Virginia Lee**
**pastel on paper**
**16" x 12"**

You know the Woman Warrior—as Esther M. Friesner noted, back in her 1995 introduction to the first of her beloved *Chicks in Chainmail* anthologies: "In the olden days, when comics still cost a dime and licorice whips wasn't the name of an X-rated movie, if you did have a Woman Warrior, she would invariably be clothed in some variation of the chainmail bikini...the one advantage of the chainmail bikini was how easy it was to slither out of when the Woman Warrior finally met the one Unspoiled Barbarian Swordsman who could make her a *real* woman."

The impossibly large-breasted Woman Warrior in the chainmail (or sometimes leather and fur) bikini, McGuire's tattooed and midriff-bared Urban Fantasy Babe, and just maybe the occasional slender, ethereal elf or fairy maiden in a clingy gown—are these the "standard" images of the feminine in what we commonly think of as fantasy art?

Many fans seem to think that this is the case, and understandably so, given how frequently such images seem to appear these days on the covers of books and magazines. And judging from the buzz among female fans in the online and convention communities, there seems to be a perception that this is due to two main factors: a tradition of marketing solely with the titillation of young male fans in mind, and a dearth of female fantasy illustrators.

Are these things true? Leaving the first for a bit, let's briefly look at the great modern day fantasy illustrators... Who are they?

For the purposes of "modern day" we'll consider the late Victorian/Edwardian age as our jumping-off place—the time that gave us such revered fantasy illustrators as Arthur Rackham, Warwick Goble, H. J. Ford, Maxfield Parrish, John D. Batten, and Edmund Dulac, as well as the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their adherents, whose paintings of mythical and legendary figures are still used as fantasy illustrations today. Certainly the names of these men and their amazing work leap to mind when fantasy and fairy tale illustrations are the topic of discussion.

So too, however, should the names of their equally accomplished and beloved female colleagues of the time, whose art is easily recognized by anyone who has owned a variety of editions of such classics as Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, George

*There Was an Old Woman* by Rima Staines, Colored pencil, 25 X 17 cm

***The Capture***
**by Virginia Lee**
**pencil on paper**
**12" x 9"**

MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Fairy Tales* by Hans Christian Andersen, or *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

Kay Nielsen. Jessie Willcox Smith. Kate Greenaway. Sulamith Wulfing. Margaret Tarrant. Adrienne Segur. Eleanor Vere Boyle.

These are but a few of the women who studied alongside their male counterparts in some of the finest art schools in the United States and in Europe—and they worked for many of the same publishers and illustrated many of the same tales. From simple watercolors of prim children reading nursery rhymes to rich, vivid, and sparkling visualizations of enchanted princesses and wicked queens, their art lives on today. Indeed, even today when one thinks of "fairies" one is still just as likely to picture the art of Cicely Mary Barker as to think of the more modern depictions of the fey folk done by Brian Froud, Amy Brown, or Jessica Galbreth.

Moving through the twentieth century, we think of an author who has probably inspired more fantasy art than any other modern writer: J. R. R. Tolkien. And while Alan Lee, John Howe, and Ted Nasmith probably come to mind first when the average person thinks of Tolkien illustrators, Tolkien himself had his own favorite: Pauline Baynes. Baynes was in fact such a wonderful fantasy artist that she not only illustrated many covers and interior pages for Tolkien's works, but she was the original illustrator for C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series.

Another popular female illustrator and contemporary of Baynes's, Trina Schart Hyman illustrated over 150 books, many of them fairy tales and fantasy novels by such authors as Astrid Lindgren, Vivian Vande Velde, and Lloyd Alexander. Many fantasy readers could stretch out an arm to their closest bookshelf and find a sample of her work.

Obviously, just a small sampling shows us that women have been respected and successful fantasy artists for the past century. They continue on that path today, and we have examples of a variety of some of the best to discuss. But first, we have to check back in on our Woman Warrior....

Commercial fantasy art isn't limited to illustration. There are calendars, statues, T-shirts, greeting cards, stickers, and hundreds of other forms of merchandise upon which fantasy art can be printed and sold. This brings us back to our Woman Warrior and her scanty and impractical armor.

Noted fantasy writer, editor, and artist Terri Windling says: "I entered the fantasy field in the early '80s when 'scantily clad damsels in distress' were the norm, not just for sword-and-sorcery titles but also for literary works of fantasy, and I worked hard to convince the publishers who employed me to broaden their range of fantasy cover imagery, and to use artists in the Romantic tradition (like Tom Canty, Alan Lee, Charles Vess, and Kinuko Craft) rather than artists in the Heroic tradition (Frazetta, Vallejo, etc.) for books on the literary end of the spectrum. The Romantic tradition has its roots in Victorian Pre-Raphaelite Art, Art Nouveau, and Golden Age Fairy Tale Illustration—all eras of art I'm personally very fond of."

No matter which artist is credited for the emergence of the Warrior Woman in the chainmail bikini as a force to be reckoned with—Boris Vallejo is mentioned most frequently—and despite the efforts of respected editors like Windling, it can be reasonably argued that it wasn't simply her appearance in drafty attire on an assortment of book and magazine covers that made her such an iconic fantasy image.

The seventies and eighties were a great time for merchandising, and the Warrior Woman jumped off the magazine covers and into the world of marketing. She was on posters, buttons, school notebooks, and stickers. Young would-be artists doodled her on their desks and the legs of their blue jeans. She appeared on album covers and turned up as a tattoo on more than a few heavy metal fans' biceps.

To be sure, Warrior Woman is *supposed* to be a fighter—she almost always has a sword. And she is muscular. It's the chainmail bikini that leads many women to believe that the Warrior Woman just might be intended less for

***Queen of Spades Sends Her Regards***
**by Stephanie Pui-Mun Law**
**Watercolor**
**16" x 11"**

the empowerment of women than for the enticement of adolescent boys. But even then there will be an argument, because one of the most famous models for and painters of the Warrior Woman is another female artist, Julie Bell, and she herself clearly does not find this image degrading or insulting to women.

Do we really find Warrior Woman offensive, or are we simply tired of seeing her and her Urban Fantasy counterpart? Are we bored with their images? Are we just looking for feminine images that have some variety? Or does it go deeper than that? What are women looking for fantasy art?

Amanda Gannon, writer, artist, and former Arts and Culture editor for *Weird Tales magazine*, opines: "Art that is about *the appearance of women*, woman as subject, is not the same as art that is about women, or being a woman. They do cross paths quite often, but there is a difference, and far and away most of the fantasy art we see is more the former than the latter... I'm very much a fan of sexuality being one aspect of power that women can draw upon, I really am, I think that women's culture and also to a lesser extent society as a whole is finally coming to really embrace that and celebrate it in a very positive way. But sexual power is not a trait found in all strong women, nor are all strong or sexual women beautiful women, and I think it's kind of terrible that we don't have many fantasy images of strong women that aren't sexualized, or, like Nene Thomas or Amy Brown or Kinuko Craft, are simply *beautiful*. I'm not advocating only painting pictures of ugly people just to teach our sexist culture a lesson or anything like that, I quite like to look at pictures of beautiful women, I'm advocating painting beautiful pictures of people who look like real people living in their bodies, in a world that feels real around them. I'm advocating painting pictures of women that are about something other than the woman's attractiveness or her symbolic significance... Beautiful images, not images that are only about beauty."

One contemporary artist who paints beautiful images is Jeanie Tomanek. Her fantasy women and animals are slightly surreal, yet they glow with a vision and life that makes them look as though they are about to step off the page and speak to the viewer. In The Star Fishers, two dogs and a woman float in a midnight sea surrounded by stars, dangling a cobwebby net, ready to catch fish or stars or whatever might wander into their net. A giant raven embraces a pale winged girl on a tree branch in *Fledgling*. A dark figure cuts away a girl's shadow with a bright pair of scissors in "Shadow Thief." Her art is mystical yet powerful. She says on her website: "Literature, folk tales and myths often inspire my exploration of the feminine archetype. My figures often bear the scars and imperfections that, to me, characterize the struggle to become."

If fantasy fans are tired of seeing the same old images of the feminine in fantasy art, Tomanek's surreal ladies are a refreshing change.

So too are those of Rima Staines, a Devon artist and illustrator who, according to her website, "travelled for a year and a day in a house on wheels to the edge of Dartmoor where she now sits in an old cottage amongst books and paints and writes tales of her days and thoughts of her stories and songs of her paintings..." (Her 2003 degree dissertation, *Misrule, Mockery & Monstrosity in Marginal Medieval Art*, is available to read on her website as well!)

***The Lady Snake*** **by Virginia Lee wire, polymer clay, acrylic and tissue paper approximate height-12"**

Staines paints and draws images of faeries and fairy tale beings, most of which appear whimsical at first glance, only to reveal a much more intense beauty and subtle power with a second look.

A family in *Lodka* appears as though taken from a medieval icon or church window. An odd little woman holds the moon and the sea in her pregnant belly while little shadow people pass below and above her in *My Storybook Children Go Forth*.

***Slova Sova*** **by Rima Staines Medium gouache and pastel Size: 44 x 50 cm**

Her work has medieval and Russian flavors, with modern and English spice, and is both entirely different from Tomanek's and yet equally intriguing as art of the fantastic. Her future as a distinguished fantasy artist seems assured.

Rima Staines is often mentioned in the

same breath as another female illustrator and artist, Virginia Lee. (In fact, when asked to name favorite contemporary fantasy artists, Terri Windling said, "When I think of mythic, fantastical art that powerfully explores issues of self and gender, two of the younger generation of artists spring to mind: Virginia Lee and Rima Staines.")

Lee, also from Devon, is the daughter of esteemed illustrator Alan Lee and visionary artist Marja Lee Kruÿt. She worked as a sculptor on sets and memorabilia for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films and has illustrated a number of children's books. Her art frequently touches on images of the feminine and each feels somehow like a deeply personal view of the artist. Though she often works in the subtlest of colors and shades, even her monochromatic pictures seem terribly vibrant. Her tree girls are lithe and seem to move on the page as if swaying in an unseen breeze. Her plump, morose stepsister clutching a tiny glass slipper is the very picture of disappointment. Virginia Lee is one of the most promising fairy tale illustrators working today.

*Mirage*
**by Stephanie Pui-Mun Law**
**Watercolor**
**12" x 17"**

If artists such as Jeanie Tomanek, Rima Staines, and Virginia Lee are making powerful fantasy art awash with nontraditionally beautiful feminine imagery, other contemporary artists are still using more conventionally beautiful images of women to great effect.

"Kinuko Craft," says Amanda Gannon. "Her women are ethereal and so forth, but where she's coming from and where she's going with it are very different from a lot of fantasy art that is really only about being beautiful to look at. I find her work meaningful on a deep level, it's very much in a 'women's mysteries' kind of way, which serves to connect the viewer with a view of woman as powerful, archetypal... The setting can be unsettling or creepy, but the women themselves are seldom threatening. Her images are ethereal and fey, and layered with meaningful imagery. The women aren't depicted as powerless, they are, specifically, powerful, but it's not a physical power. It's a psychic power, really the power of folklore and myth, which she's using the painting to illuminate."

Deborah Brannon, a writer and book reviewer, votes for Stephanie Pui-Mun Law. "Law paints women who are incandescent, capturing a tempered complexity—her female figures radiate power, mystery, vulnerability, and self-confidence by turns. She depicts woman in all her many faces, yet with a delicate artistic style that captures an underlying fierceness."

Law is a premiere fantasy artist and illustrator and her images are strong and vital. She combines Chinese and Celtic aspects in her work, often portraying mythical or mythological figures from both cultures. Her paintings are lush, complex, and highly detailed, and they grace book covers, magazines, and even tarot cards.

Another illustrator with a big following is Ursula Vernon, best known for web comic *Digger* and her *Dragonbreath* series of children's books. She does a wide variety of illustrations and fantasy art, from anthropomorphic animals to whimsical cartoonish characters. In a tribute to Art Nouveau she has done several *Orc Nouveau* paintings featuring glamorously blowsy orc maidens in the lush style of Alphonse Mucha.

Vernon has done feminine images of all types, from long and lean to short and fat. She says: "...portrayals of women at all in our society are skewed as hell. It's rare to see a fat woman portrayed positively anywhere in media, for example, so I can't say fantasy art is really any more broken than anything else. Old women are also rare, and genuinely muscular women are

about as common as hen's teeth. (I was very excited by the female blacksmith on Hercules, back in the day...) To a certain extent, however, I think we're kind of stuck—many of us are working artists, and we gotta paint what sells!"

Women write fantasy. Women read fantasy. Women buy fantasy. And women are voicing their dissatisfaction with art that simply isn't interesting, and in some cases they find actively offensive.

There's a place for Urban Fantasy Babe, and for our Woman Warrior in her tiny, scratchy mail bikini. They have their market. Perhaps the truly ambitious publishers need to realize that women are a much larger market share for fantasy than ever before, and adjust accordingly. Women want fantasy art to be interesting. Women want fantasy art to reflect their diversity. Women want fantasy art to be *fresh*.

Of course, if the public wants these things, the public has to buy them. As Ursula Vernon points out, "I loved doing the fat fairy, I'm proud of the painting, I've even won a couple of awards for it—but the prints don't exactly fly off the shelves. So I can hardly blame other artists for painting what puts food on the table. It'd be nice if society moved in a direction where non-idealized body types were just as popular, and we didn't have to pander to eat."

It's difficult to claim that fans want something new, fresh, and interesting if artists can't sell those images. Women who want to see diverse art in books and magazines need to let publishers know that it's worth their while to make it happen. Clearly there is not now nor has there ever been a lack of superb female fantasy artists and illustrators. Nor, in fact, is there a lack of excellent male illustrators who do lovely and powerful feminine images which are not all about the sexual exploitation or the same tired stereotypical images. And fandom needs to make sure that the publishers know what they want to see!

Images from the early Victorian and Golden age artists can be found online at http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/illustrations/ and at http://www.artpassions.net/.

Stephanie Pui-Mun Law maintains an image-rich website at http://www.shadowscapes.com/.

More art from Rima Staines and Jeanie Tomanek can be found online at http://www.the-hermitage.org.uk/ and http://www.jeanietomanek.com/, respectively.

Ursula Vernon's art can be seen at http://ursulavernon.com/.

Virginia Lee's website is http://www.virginialee.co.uk/.

***Walk the Frog* by Ursula Vernon– Medium: digital 8" X 10"**

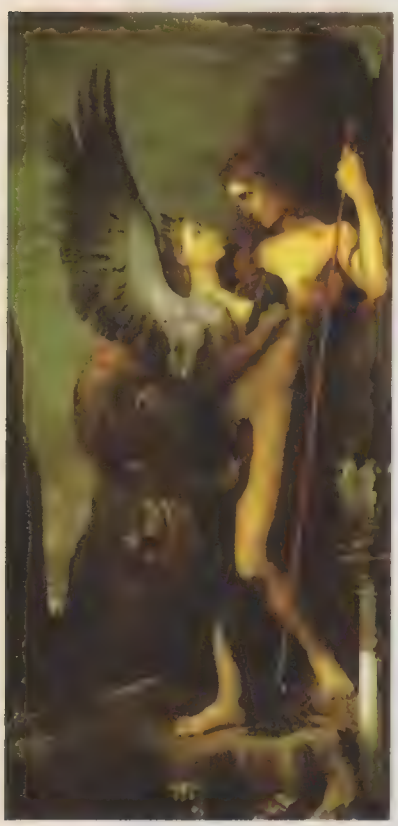
# A Brief History of Monsters

by Theodora Goss

If you happened to be in New York City in the summer of 1842, you could see a rare and wonderful creature: a real mermaid. She had been caught by a naturalist named Dr. Griffin off the coast of the Feejee Islands. Dr. Griffin himself had been reluctant to display her, but his friend P. T. Barnum had persuaded him that the public should be allowed to see such a marvelous sight. He had offered the newspapers a woodcut of a beautiful woman with the tail of a fish, and they had printed it. He had also distributed copies of a pamphlet with her picture on it throughout the city. Anticipation ran high: the crowds to see the mermaid were enormous.

Those allowed into the exhibition hall were given a lecture by Dr. Griffin detailing how he had found the mermaid and explaining that since there were sea-horses and sea-lions, there must certainly be sea-humans as well. And they were shown the mermaid herself. I wonder how many of them realized that they were looking at a clever hoax: the dried head and torso of a monkey sewn onto the tail of a fish. A reporter from the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* who seems to have been fooled wrote:

> The monster is one of the greatest curiosities of the day. It was caught near the Feejee islands, and taken to Penambuco, where it was purchased by an English gentleman named Griffin, who is making a collection of rare and curious things for the British Museum, or some other cabinet of curiosities. This animal, fish, flesh or whatever it may be, is about three feet long, and the lower part of the body is a perfectly formed fish, but from the breast upwards this character is lost, and then approaches human form—or rather that of a monkey. [1]



*Oedipus and the Sphinx* by Gustav Moreau

Dr. Griffin was as much of a fake as the mermaid herself. He was actually Levi Lyman, Barnum's collaborator. Both men had conspired to fool the public. But the public seemed to enjoy being fooled. After the initial exhibition, the Feejee Mermaid was displayed at Barnum's American Museum, where she significantly increased ticket sales. She remained a popular attraction, both in museums and on tour, until she was destroyed in a museum fire in the 1880s.

*The Philadelphia Public Ledger* reporter was right to call the Feejee Mermaid a "monster." We often think of monsters as large, frightening creatures, such as Polyphemus from the *Odyssey* or Frankenstein's monster. The Feejee Mermaid was neither large nor frightening. But monsters come in all sizes, and some of them are attractive—at least initially. The vampire Carmilla is beautiful and seductive before she sucks your blood. What separates monsters from ordinary creatures is something more subtle, having to do with the way we perceive the world. As we grow up, we learn to place the phenomena around us into categories. Monsters are what do not fit into those categories. They are giants with one eye, assemblages of corpses, beautiful women who can turn into cats—or monkeys with the tail of a fish. Because they do not fit, monsters make us feel what Sigmund Freud has described as the *unheimlich*, which is usually translated as the uncanny, a sensation that can range from discomfort to outright fear. And yet, as the New Yorkers who paid to see the Feejee Mermaid demonstrate, we are also fascinated by monsters. They inhabit the myths and legends of our earliest history as well as Hollywood blockbusters. There is a direct line of descent between Polyphemus and the Terminator.

## I. Monsters of Myth and Legend

Why are we so fascinated by monsters? They seem to produce a simultaneous and paradoxical mixture of pleasure and fear. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a monster is "a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance." As examples, the *OED* lists the centaur, sphinx, and minotaur—all monsters from classical mythology. Myths and

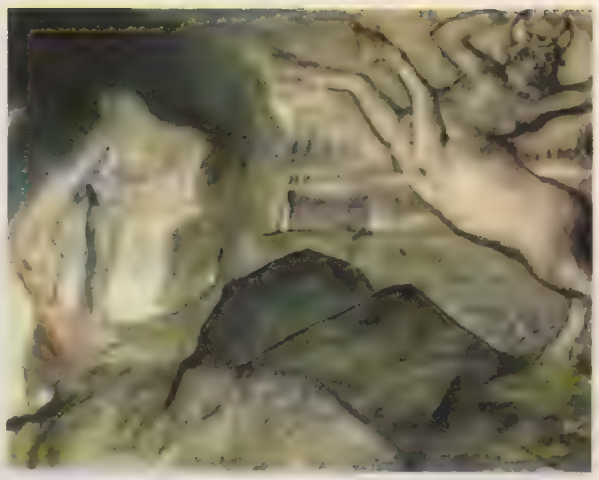
1 Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 136.

legends contain a number of such hybrid creatures: a partial list would include the manticore (a lion with a human head and the tail of a scorpion), the chimera (a lion with the tail of a snake and the head of a goat), the cockatrice (a dragon with a rooster's head), the griffin (a lion with the head and wings of an eagle), the echidna (half woman, half serpent), and the siren (half woman, half bird or fish). Even the dragon is a hybrid: a reptile that is winged, like a bird. However, monsters can also be creatures with exaggerated traits, such as giants, who are like humans but significantly larger.

The word monster comes from the Latin "monstrum," meaning a portent or prodigy, from the verb "monere," to warn. Once, the birth of creatures with congenital deformities were considered portents—warnings of misfortune to come. According to Stephen Asma in *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, a monster is an omen: "a display of God's wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice."[2] During the reign of Pericles, a ram with a single horn was born on one of his farms. A seer determined that the monstrous ram was a portent: Pericles would triumph over his political rival, Thucydides. The philosopher Anaxagoras chopped the ram's head in half and observed that its brain had developed abnormally, resulting in the single horn. He offered a scientific explanation for the monster. But Pericles did indeed triumph over Thucydides, and the prophetic power of the seer was celebrated. [3]

What about the monsters we are most familiar with, not rams with single horns but unicorns and hydras? A number of scientific explanations have been suggested for their appearance. Some monsters may be the result of misinterpretation—of ancient fossils or contemporary natural phenomena. Dragons may have been inspired by the bones of prehistoric reptiles, and medieval unicorn horns usually belong to narwhales. But perhaps it is more important to determine not how monsters originated, but what they mean to us. Why are they so common in our myths and legends? We know heroes by the monsters they fight: Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra, Theseus and the Minotaur, Perseus and Medusa, Beowulf and Grendel, St. George and the dragon. Heroes are defined by their monsters: it is their ability to fight monsters that makes them heroes. Since monsters are by definition unnatural, heroes restore the natural order. They safeguard civilization, symbolized by places such as Heorot, the great hall that the monster Grendel invades.

In the pagan world, this dichotomy made sense: monsters were ancient, often more ancient than the gods themselves. They represented the forces of primal chaos. Echidna, who had the body of a snake and the head and torso of a beautiful woman, was called the mother of all monsters because she had birthed so many, including Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades; the Lernaean Hydra; and the Gorgons. Her children presented a continual threat to heroes; they would always have monsters to fight. The forces of primal chaos were always waiting to destroy civilization. But after the spread of monotheism, monsters became more problematic. Why would a benevolent God create such creatures? One answer was that monsters were God's servants. Since God had created them, monsters such as Behemoth and Leviathan revealed God's power, which was beyond human understanding. However, what was a medieval theologian to make of monsters such as the Sciopodes (humans with one leg but two feet), Cynocephali (dog-headed humans), or Blemmyae (headless humans with eyes and mouths on their chests), who were believed to live in distant lands? They were not mentioned in the Bible as exemplars of God's power. One conclusion was that they were outside the divine dispensation, descendants of Cain who, at the Apocalypse, would join forces with the Antichrist to persecute humanity. In *Beowulf*, Grendel is described as belonging to that line.



*The Minotaur* by William Blake

*Medusa* by Caravaggio

Despite its Christian references, *Beowulf* belongs to a pagan age, when heroes still fought with monsters. In the medieval era, monsters became less important than other enemies of God: witches and demons. Demons were angels who had turned away from God, and witches were the humans they had tempted into worshiping their master, Satan. To fight them, one did not need a hero. One needed piety, humility, and discipline—although the Inquisition could be useful as well. If these were monsters, they were internal ones. They represented not an external chaotic force but personal temptation. Christianity gave us monsters that were within—our own

2 Ibid., 13
3 Ibid., 43.

desires, which we had to fight if we wanted to remain pure and holy. Although St. George's dragon is an external monster, it represents this internal threat. Medieval artists sometimes represented the dragon with female genitalia, to symbolize the lure of sexuality.[4] In Christian legend, the hero was replaced by the saint.

*Hercules and the Hydra* by Antonio Pollaiolo

## II. Monsters in the Age of Science

For a while, it seemed as though monsters might go away. The Enlightenment, with its interest in rationality and empiricism, sought to banish monsters, to shed light in the dark corners where they might hide. In the age of exploration, the distant lands where Cynocephali and Blemmyae once dwelt were found to contain unusual animals, but nothing monstrous or outside the natural order. In the early 1700s, a young Carl Linnaeus traveled to Hamburg to see a famous monster: the hydra. It was a stuffed specimen belonging to the burgomaster of Hamburg, who hoped to sell the monster at a profit. Even the king of Denmark was interested. It was a frightening, if not particularly large, beast with seven heads and the body of a snake. Linnaeus immediately detected a fraud: the hydra had been created by a skilled taxidermist, blending the bodies of various animals. It was, in a sense, an early form of the Feejee Mermaid. Linnaeus proposed that it had been created by medieval monks to demonstrate the truth of the Book of Revelations and convince the faithful that the Apocalypse was nigh. [5]

Nowadays, we know Linnaeus primarily as the creator of the Linnaean system of classification. Asma sees Linnaeus's debunking of the hydra as an indication of the scientific era to come: "Science was on the rise, and monsters were being exposed as hoaxes or were being cleaned up and fit into the new system of uniform natural laws. Linnaeus himself became the great classifier of animal and plant species, genera, families, orders, classes, and phyla. A conceptual grid of hierarchical categories had been laid over the teeming chaos of nature, and a calm order had

4 Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, Introduction, *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 12.

5 Stephen T. Asma, 123-4.

*Ulysses and the Sirens* by John William Waterhouse

been imposed on the seemingly infinite diversity of God's creation."[6] At least in theory. But nature was not as orderly as such classificatory systems implied. Sometimes it produced creatures that did not fit into an accepted classification. When the platypus was first introduced to English scientists, they rejected it as yet another taxidermic hoax. It was eventually categorized, but scientists still had to grapple with how to classify congenital abnormalities labeled monstrous, such as cases of hypertrichosis or werewolf syndrome, a condition that causes hair to grow all over the face and body.

During the 1830s, Charles Darwin became interested in how such phenomena fit within the evolutionary theories he was developing. Initially, he hypothesized that extreme deviations from a parental type could form the basis for new species. But his research revealed that extreme variations were not passed on to the next generation, either because the offspring reverted to type or because the bearer of such congenital abnormalities could not reproduce. Darwin concluded that only gradual variations could be passed on through natural selection. However, he hypothesized that such variations could demonstrate where we had come from evolutionarily, because they represented throwbacks to previous states. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin "considered cases of werewolf syndrome together with humans who are born with tails and suggested that both kinds of monsters are evidence that human beings are descended from animal ancestors."[7] Such "monsters" demonstrated the validity of evolution.

Paradoxically, out of this era of scientific advancement came some of the most famous monsters of literary history. In 1818, Mary Shelley created Victor Frankenstein, not a doctor as many of my students initially believe, but a biology student who takes his laboratory work a little too seriously. And Frankenstein created what is perhaps the most famous of all monsters. Rightly so, because Frankenstein's monster represents an important development in the history of monsters. In Shelly's novel, the monster speaks for himself. He justifies his actions, explains why he has become monstrous—because he has not received the loving care of his parent, Frankenstein. My students tend to sympathize with the monster, whose story is so much more compelling than his creator's. It implies that monsters are not born but made. This realization may be the legacy of the nineteenth-century monster story. Dr. Jekyll releases Mr. Hyde because of the repressive conditions under which he must live as a Victorian gentleman, Dorian Gray becomes a monster because his portrait gives him the license to act however he pleases, and Dr. Moreau's Beast Men are manufactured by yet another nineteenth-century mad scientist. The monsters of myth and legend are monsters

6 Ibid., 125.

7 Ibid., 169.

by birth. Nineteenth-century literature implied that monsters are created. Which makes us wonder—who are more monstrous, the monsters or their creators?

Nineteenth-century monsters reflected advances in the biological sciences and in new disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology. We can connect the archaeological discoveries made in Egypt during the late nineteenth century to the introduction of a brand new monster: the mummy, found in literary works such as Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*. The end of that century also introduced a monster that would be more fully developed in the twentieth century: the space alien. H. G. Wells's Martians in *The War of the Worlds* could be considered precursors of Cthulhu, the fearsome otherworldly monster in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu." Lovecraft's shoggoths and Elder Gods are alien not only because they come from the cold, dark reaches of space, but also because they are inimical to and beyond the understanding of the humans they encounter. In them, we can see a new world view associated with advances in astronomy and physics: the view that within the cosmos, human beings are insignificant actors subject to forces they cannot understand. Unlike the monsters of myth and legend, these monsters could not be fought. No hero or saint could save us from them.

*Manticore* by Joannes Jonstonus

### III. Our Monsters, Ourselves

Literary monsters make us shiver with pleasurable fright, but whom we call a monster, and why, has consequences. According to Asma, "During the nineteenth century 'freak shows' and 'monster spectacles' were common; such exploitation of genetically and developmentally disabled people must be one of the lowest points on the ethical meter of our civilization."[8] Barnum himself employed Tom Thumb, who was billed as the smallest man in the world; Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins; and Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy, who had hypertrichosis. Many of Barnum's performers were well-compensated and went on to live ordinary lives: Chang and Eng married a pair of sisters, became naturalized American citizens, and settled down on a farm they had bought with money earned from exhibiting themselves. However, in a society that did not accept physical differences, they had few choices other than to become sideshow performers—spectacles for an audience eager to see a real "monster."

Employment as a sideshow performer was certainly better than the ancient practice of putting children with congenital disabilities to death. Roman law specified that a father "shall immediately put to death a son recently born, who is a monster, or has a form different from that of members of the human race."[9] Historically, there have been arguments for more compassionate treatment. Aristotle, from an early scientific viewpoint, argued that congenital abnormalities were the result of problems during the reproductive process, with no particular meaning. Monsters were not portents but natural phenomena. In *Generation of Animals*, he states, "Even he who does not resemble his parents is already in a certain sense a monstrosity,"[10] a statement that includes us all. From a religious point of view, Saint Augustine argued that since God had decided to create monsters such as the Sciopodes, "we should not suppose that the wisdom with which he fashions the physical being of men has gone astray in the case of the monsters which are bound to be born among us of human parents; for that would be to regard the works of God's wisdom as the products of an imperfectly skilled craftsman." [11]

Unfortunately, Augustine's view that we are all human beings created by a loving deity has not always prevailed: throughout human history, certain individuals and groups have been identified as monstrous. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian identifies the Jewish theater manager who employs his love interest, Sybil Vane, as a monster. As Judith Halberstam points out in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Jews in particular have been marginalized and treated as monstrous throughout European history. But Dorian is the one whose callousness and cruelty is responsible for Sybil's death. Oscar Wilde, a member of other historically marginalized groups (both Irish and homosexual), makes clear the danger of calling an individual or group monstrous. It gives society permission to do what the villagers do to Frankenstein's monster in the movie version: come after them with pitchforks, or worse.

Why do we have a tendency to assign such a designation? According to Asma:

8 Ibid.,7.

9 Ibid., 41.

10 Ibid., 48.

11 Quoted in Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, 9.

> Experiments demonstrate that animals and humans respond to their earliest experiences by internalizing a cognitive classificatory system based on the creatures they regularly encounter. After a certain time, however, the classification system "solidifies" into a cognitive framework, and any subsequent strange and unclassifiable encounter produces fear in the knower. Categorical mismatch makes the knower very uncomfortable. [12]

This fearful response to a categorical mismatch is similar to what Freud describes in "The Uncanny." Freud never quite succeeds in defining what causes the feeling of the uncanny, when the hairs on the backs of our necks stand up or we scream with terror. But his examples often involve categorical mismatch: automata that seem to be alive, limbs that move by themselves, doubles such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or Siamese Twins. What these phenomena have in common is that we can't categorize them. What, after all, do we call Thing from *The Addams Family*? Or the replicants from *Blade Runner*? Monster becomes a sort of catch-all category for what we can't name.

Freud also implies that the feeling of the uncanny is caused by the emergence of what we have repressed in the process of individual growth and our development as a society. According to Halberstam, monsters are produced out of those parts of our individual or social selves. In other words, if we define ourselves as proper English gentlemen, our monster may be shorter, more primitive, perhaps like an ape. He might slink along the London streets, violently assaulting innocent passers-by. That sounds like Mr. Hyde, doesn't it? For Halberstam, monsters are made up of what we have abjected. The abject, a term used by the philosopher Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, refers to what we reject in the process of becoming ourselves. It is the not-self, the other. Monsters are the abjected parts of ourselves; according to Halberstam, they "have to be everything the human is not." [13]

Scholars often identify the monster with the other, but monsters are more complicated than that. In Lovecraft's "The Outsider," the unnamed narrator escapes from the benighted castle where he has been imprisoned for years. He stumbles along a road he vaguely remembers and finally approaches another castle where a party is in progress. He enters—the partygoers scream and flee. Then he sees what they are fleeing from: "a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable." He draws closer, touches it with his hand—and realizes that he is touching a mirror. [14] This is the monster as abject, but also as the self. Monsters are always most frightening when they are inside us, when we realize that we were the monsters all along. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Donna Harraway argues that is exactly what we have become: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs." [15] Seeing my students walk around campus talking on cell phones and realizing how dependent I have become on my own electronic resources, I have to agree. Skynet has not yet won, but we have changed. Online, we are connected in ways that previous generations could not have imagined, as though we were a collective hydra—one creature with a billion heads. We have become hybrid creatures, part human and part machine, as outlandish as the monsters of myth and legend.

Fedor Jeftichew

Perhaps that is why we have a different attitude toward monsters. Movies such as *Shrek* have redefined the monster in a particularly modern way. Our monsters have identity conflicts and contradictory impulses. Beneath their large, ugly (or in the case of modern vampires, beautiful) exteriors, they think and feel—and they are worthy of love. For me, the most interesting and affecting moment in *Shrek* occurs when Princess Fiona chooses to become a monster herself so she can be with her beloved. This modern attitude may account for the astonishing number of crocheted Cthulhu dolls that can be found on the internet. We are no longer frightened of monsters, who are easy to identify. We are frightened of human beings who look perfectly ordinary but commit monstrous acts. Our television shows are rife with that most frightening of modern phenomena, the

12 Steven T. Asma, 184.

13 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 12.

14 H. P. Lovecraft, "The Outsider," *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* (New York, Penguin, 1999), 43-9.

15 Donna Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151.

serial killer—whose progenitor, Jack the Ripper, roamed the nineteenth-century London streets like a less obvious Mr. Hyde.

The dangers of our twenty-first-century world can make us nostalgic for a good old-fashioned monster, with the body of a lion, an eagle's wings, or snakes for hair. But perhaps with our modern attitudes, we will be less likely to run away in fear, more likely to sit down and listen to the story that the monster is telling.

Mermaid on Stained Glass Window at Saint-Sulpice Church in Fougères, France

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THE
PROGRESS OF
SOLSTICE
AND
CHANCE
by
Richard Bowes
Illustration by
Raoul Vitale

THE LIVES OF THE GODS ARE NOT LIKE OURS. THEY'RE MUCH, MUCH LONGER...

There was never such a celebration as when the Queen of Summer wed the King of Winter. The Four Winds, mutual relatives of the bride and groom, in a fit of champagne-fueled excitement, blew open every door and window in the Palace of Time.

Old Cronus himself, last and greatest of the First Gods, officiated in the high-domed palace. Standing by to assist him if he faltered were the Lord of Life, smiling as always, and his wife, the blank-faced Lady of Death. But Cronus still remembered all the words and rituals.

The young cousins, all of them offspring of the gods and descendents of Cronus, played at Flowers and Cups on the shaded pathways of the Arbor of Gossiping Trees. Chance, a tiny child with her mother Fate's wise grey eyes and Folly her father's bright red hair, listened to the rustling leaves above her as those trees, which could glimpse the ceremony, described it to the ones farther back.

"Is this," one tree whispered, "a marriage of love or convenience?"

"Both really," another tree replied. "The love affair of the King of Winter and Lady Death has been derailed by the Lord of Life. You know he engineered this marriage to thwart his wife." But at that moment one of Chance's cousins cried when a slightly older one swept up all his flowers in her cup and Chance heard no more.

A year for the Gods is generations for mortals. The newly married couple spent half of each of their years in his kingdom and half in hers. Each autumn their Progress rolled through the days and months as they traveled from her palace in the tropics to his northern castle. Each spring they traveled back again. They enjoyed each other's company early on.

Before they got bored a daughter was born with her father's hair like frost and her mother's lovely bronze skin. Her name was Solstice and at her presentation at the Palace of Time the godparents were Fate and Folly, she with her locked book, he in his costume of cap and bells.

Cronus was present but remained seated through the ceremony. Life and Death walked side by side down the Boulevard of Ecstasy and into the Palace to preside.

As the godparents recited their pledges to look after the well-being of the child, Winter and Summer gave full attention to their infant daughter.

Those who studied Life and Death noticed that their eyes never met. His remained fixed on the ceiling. Hers wandered from Winter to Summer and back again.

From the doorway of the Ballroom of Forgotten Dances, young Chance watched with a bit of her mother Fate's dispassion and a touch of Folly her father's rueful smile. Behind her the cousins played the Game of Skulls and Crowns on the black and white marble floor.

One of them crowed with laughter when he won for the black team by capping Mordred's skull with Charlemagne's crown. Invisible musicians played a lilting but piquant jig to which listeners would tap their feet and which no one could remember later.

* * *

What Solstice liked best about her childhood was not the palm trees and blue waters of her mother's palace or her father's castle of ice and snow. It was the journey that started at the end of each summer and the Divine Progress through harvest time and into winter.

The grand barges were draped with gold cloth and white silk, sails snapped as they crossed open water, the oar masters' drums beat in rhythm as they plied up rivers. On the shore harvesters squinted against the sun to catch a glimpse of the Gods.

Her parents tended to ignore the people who came out to worship them. But when Solstice was held aloft she would wave and the crowds would sing her praises.

Gods can be almost any size that suits them. At moments Winter and Summer and even Solstice could be giants. Harvest altars, with mortal renderings of the child's smiling image and decorated with corn and pumpkins and game birds, were erected along their way.

Grass turned from green to amber, leaves blazed with color. Her parents rode with hunting parties and she followed on a pony amid an entourage of dwarf nursemaids and monkey servants.

The landscape turned grey and iron-black, great flights of birds flew overhead, thin ice formed on standing water. Fires warmed the great tents as the Progress made its way to the outskirts of winter.

Snow flew and horses pulled their sleds over firm river ice. Firelight flickered in log cabins. Parties of wood cutters came out of the fir forests with great stacks of kindling gathered for the huge bonfires that marked the passage of the seasons.

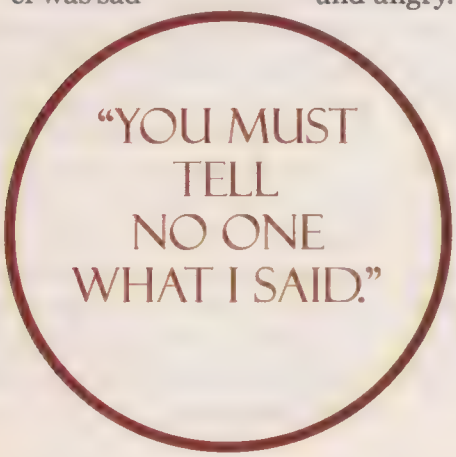
Beneath the ice walls and snow turrets of her father's castle were celebrations that Solstice imagined would continue forever. In an immense cavern with frost-covered walls and ceiling that reflected the firelight, faces glowed, arms were linked, legs spun through the steps of the ceremonial dance. Music was played far into the night. Her mother with her head thrown back, her father leaning over his wife, kissing her mouth: Solstice would always remember those things.

Each spring the Progress traveled from Winter's castle to Summer's palace. They sailed on galleys with iron prows that broke the ice flows and people on the shore held up the first green shoots.

One day when the King of Winter departed to go on a hunt his daughter was just enough of a child to ask him if she could come too. He smiled and said no but maybe some other year.

Her mother looked away and said nothing. She and Solstice made the next part of their journey above the land on woven gondolas born aloft by enormous flights of birds. They passed over a port city with walls and a citadel. Solstice remembered that it had been a seaside town with its docks all golden with harvested grain when they traveled north that autumn.

Her father never rejoined them at Summer's palace and her mother was sad and angry.




Solstice wondered long and hard about what she had done to make all this happen. Late in that season word came to the palace that Cronus was dying.

Solstice and her mother set out first on chariots pulled by black leopards and then on barges drawn by dolphins and whales. The sky grew dark, the earth trembled. Shepherds on hillsides, women drying wash on beaches, fishermen in their tiny boats were frightened and looked to their gods. But only Solstice glanced back.

The King of Winter was standing on the stairs of the Palace of Time when they arrived. Solstice ran to him. His wife did not. Solstice saw the coldness in their eyes.

Chance saw all that happen and thought Solstice was beautiful. She was with her father Lord Folly. And because she knew that he'd always tell the truth if you took him by surprise she asked what had happened to Winter and Summer.

"The Lord of Life persuaded Cronus who was old and unobservant to make Summer and Winter wed. For a time that seemed to keep his wife and King Winter apart. Now obviously it does not." Folly shook his head amazed as he always was when this happened and told her, "You must tell no one what I said."

In death Cronus was as big compared to the other Gods as they could be to mortals. His body filled the Hall of Kings. A battle shield covered each eye. Dozens of his descendants carried him from the Palace down to the sea and placed him on a golden barge. The earth shivered beneath them, waves smashed against the shore, and the marble stairs of the Palace of Time cracked in a hundred places.

The King of Oceans and the Queen of Tides pulled the barge out on the water. The clouds parted and noon sunlight streamed down. The barge erupted in flame and a large white spark flew toward the sun.

Then the Gods and Powers slowly turned back to the Palace for a long and contentious Council meeting. The cousins, from small to almost grown, watched from the Balcony of Fair Regard.

Once, both her parents would immediately have looked for Solstice. Now she saw her father exchange a glance with Lady Death, saw her mother walk arm in arm with Fate and Folly while watching her husband.

Chance smiled at Solstice as all the cousins went to the Corridor of Laughter and Tears. There they opened the tabernacle containing the four elements, formed a circle, and played a game of fast toss with Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. It started slowly as a game even the smallest children could play. A gust of air was batted from hand to hand while a spinning globe went around the circle in the other direction. Then a spark and a fistful of brine appeared.

As the tossing grew faster Solstice cupped her hand to catch the water as she had once before. But this time it was icy cold. She shivered as she tossed it. "Nasty as Winter," said an older cousin, and the others laughed.

"Cold as Death," said another. Someone snickered and Solstice saw eyes turn her way.

The game sped up. The flame was hot and had to be tossed as it was grabbed. The globe grew larger and spun so fast it was hard to control. The gust was now a stiff breeze that bit and blew in players' eyes. The tosses no longer went around the circle. Older participants threw across the space to ones younger and less prepared.

Solstice moved quickly, batted ice across the circle as fast as it came to her and slapped the invisible blast of air as hard as she could

right back at the cousin who had thrown it at her.

But as she did, someone sent a torch, which turned over and over as it headed her way. Solstice knocked the fire away with her hand, but instead of heading back to the other players it spun into the air. Gold filigree covered the walls and ceiling in delicate arabesques. The flame hit the wall and spurted toward the ceiling.

In amusement or horror, everyone watched. But Chance smashed the icy water against the flames and Fire disappeared from the game. She winked at Solstice who fell in love for the first time. Then everyone heard the shouts and slamming of doors as the Council broke up and the game was forgotten.

* * *

Solstice traveled back into summer with her mother. Chance and her parents accompanied them. Mountains, which Solstice had passed on the way to the funeral, had been reduced to piles of rocks. Islands full of mortals had disappeared beneath the sea.

"They had a shrine to my mother in a town right here," said Solstice.

Chance said, "We felt tremors at old Cronus's death; here the earth opened up. Our misfortunes are their catastrophes."

Solstice told her friend, "Once when I was very small they put on a pageant. People dressed as Winter and Summer, as old Cronus, as me and acted out our lives as they imagined them. I tried to make my parents stop and watch. They paused but just for a moment."

On their journey home they detoured so that the Queen of Summer could gaze upon the Gates of Death. These were bronze doors set into the mouth of a cave. Solstice watched her mother gesture in a pattern which she would never forget. Vegetation suddenly grew; vines tangled themselves all over the doors.

Fate said, "She will have to fight her way in and out of her own palace and she will always think of you."

Folly said, "And each time she'll think less of Winter." Fate nodded but Folly remembered that Solstice was present and grimaced at his own remark.

* * *

That year's Progress from summer to winter was the first Solstice made without her parents. She and her entourage floated over mountains in hot air balloons and went down smooth roads in fast carriages. Solstice was lonely without Chance. She had become a young lady. The dwarfs and monkeys now seemed like toys to be set aside.

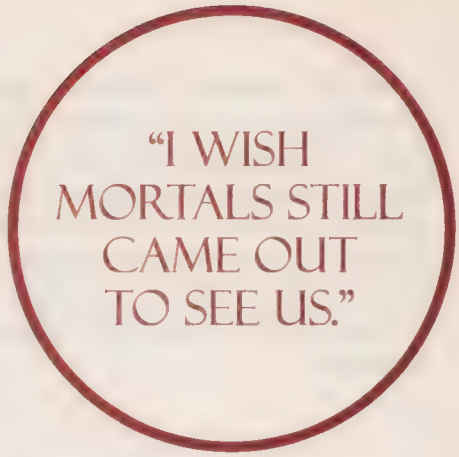
On the shore of an inland sea her mother's servants turned her over to her father's people. Solstice embarked on a thin new ship with huge sails that flew along the coast.

As the mortal world raced past, she caught sight of a long row of scaffolds each with a hanged man and saw the walled city she always noticed now burned and deserted.

The ship set out over open water and when they reached the other shore the boat dropped anchor. People saw her and while some fell on their knees many stared in what might have been fear or anger.

Solstice noticed that she had to travel farther than she ever had to reach her father's kingdom. When she arrived the King of Winter was glad to see her. But Lady Death was also there and while Death always keeps the one great secret she knows about each of us, she was not pleased to have Summer's child around her.

* * *




Toward the end of the following summer Solstice and her mother paid a visit to the Palace of Time. The Lord of Life had taken Old Cronus's place and many were not happy with this. Solstice noticed that the fire damage to the gold filigree in The Corridor of Laughter and Tears had never been repaired.

Winter was present. He and Summer encountered each other only at Council meetings. Solstice overheard older cousins describe her mother's contempt and her father's indifference. Chance told her they were talking about things they hadn't seen.

In the Rotunda of the Great Family beneath the bas-reliefs, the murals, the oil paintings of Cronus, his siblings and their descendants, the cousins played the Game of Couples.

The Sybil was brought in and placed on a marble table. Bets were laid. Then the Sybil, in silk robes and turban, all jeweled moving parts and with a painted face bright as ceramic, tossed a handful of small bones in the air.

The bones came down pointing like a skeleton's finger at one portrait on the walls. She picked them up and tossed them again and the bones pointed at another portrait. These two were a couple.

Hoots and laughter rang as Lord Folly was matched with the West Wind—no one believed that. Everyone yawned when the finger pointed first at the Sun and then at the Moon, that boring old couple.

Amid snickers Winter and Death came up as a combination again and again. But shocked silence followed when the bones pointed first to Solstice and then to Chance. Cousins murmured when the next time the bones pointed it was first to Chance and then to Solstice.

* * *

A great sun-yellow and tropic-green glider floated on the water at the foot of the cracked marble stairs of the Palace of Time. Sea planes circled above waiting to pull the glider into the air.

"I never want to come here again," Solstice said.

"We never will," said Chance with the voice of her mother, Fate. And as she said this Solstice knew that would be so.

In something not unlike a God's year and a day later Solstice and Chance traveled toward winter in a motorcade. They held hands. The night was clear and the moon was full. It would have been harvest time but no crops grew in the land of roads and parking lots through which they passed.

Solstice said to her friend, "I wish mortals still came out to see us. I miss them."

At that moment Chance caught a flicker in the corner of her eye. Turning, she saw large figures—God-size and somehow familiar—moving against the sky. She immediately ordered the driver to halt.

Hundreds of cars sat in the huge drive-in, hot rods stuffed with teens, sedans with young lovers hardly looking at the screen, station wagons with parents in the front seat and the back full of pillows and blankets and kids in pajamas with feet and drop seats.

Above them and all in dazzling color the young prince with his snow-white hair and ice-blue eyes, the princess with her dark skin and eyes of amber bowed before a majestic greybeard while four roly-poly animated characters with their cheeks puffed out flew around them in comic elation.

Chance stood holding her hand as Solstice witnessed the flurry of images that was the animated version of her parents' marriage. She watched her own birth and presentation to the world and saw the evil queen try to destroy the marriage of Winter and Summer by kidnapping their child.

That last part made Solstice shake her head as did the ending where everything turned out happily. While watching, she and Chance had assumed the Godlike stature of the characters on screen.

A few people, the bored parent tired of the dumb old legends, the lover waiting for her boyfriend to come back from the refreshment stand, turned around and caught a glimpse of two gigantic figures staring down. Several reported it to the theater management. Someone called the local paper.

Each time Solstice visited the land of ice and snow it was smaller and the trip was longer. When she and Chance reached the King of Winter in his castle, he himself seemed shrunken and diminished. Death was not there, though he kept saying he expected her at any moment.

Solstice thought of her mother who burned with life and anger and of how summer was slowly engulfing the world. But most of all she thought of the images she'd seen in the night and of the people who had watched them so intently.

She and Chance slept together openly for the first time. Solstice was just young enough and with just enough respect for her parents to hesitate in her father's house.

Chance smiled and said, "To those at the Palace of Time we are already a couple. But they don't know that we will be the greatest couple of all!" Chance spoke truth just like her father. But her smile was in no way rueful and they fell onto the bed laughing.

Much later, on their Progress back to summer, it was Chance who knew the spot where they had stopped on the way to Winter's palace. Again they arrived at night but the cars, the screen with its moving figures, were gone. Nothing remained but the fragments of a paved field lost amid weeds and a few rusted metal poles which once held speakers for each car.

The overpass behind the theater was empty of traffic. The stores on the neighboring highway stood dark in the middle of abandoned parking lots. But a cluster of lights in the distance indicated that mortals were present.

Chance found that neither Fate nor Folly had given her any wisdom that dealt with this.

Solstice stood, taking in all she saw. Then with complete self-assurance she made the gesture she had seen her mother make. Trees sprouted, the land became a meadow again.

Solstice said nothing but began to walk toward the lights and the mortals who fascinated her so. Vegetation sprang up around her. Chance paused for a moment and with no certainty, for once, of what would happen she hurried to catch up.

**Richard Bowes** has published five novels, two collections of short fiction, and fifty stories. He has won two World Fantasy Awards and the Lambda, International Horror Guild, and Million Writers awards. Recent and forthcoming stories can be found in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* and the anthologies *Bewere the Night, Naked City, After, Nebula Awards Showcase 2011, Supernatural Noir,* and *Blood and Other Cravings.*

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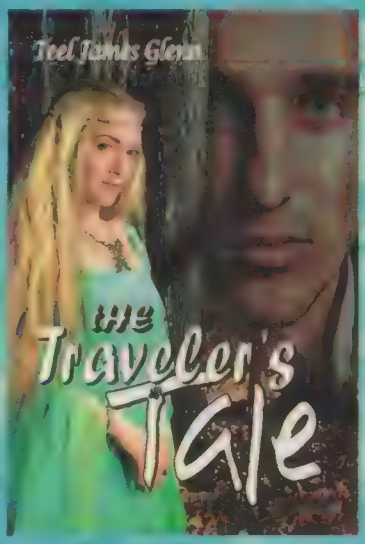


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# Isabella's Garden

Gardening is easy--all you need is soil, sun, water, seeds and an awareness of what you're planting.

by Naomi Kritzer

Illustration by
Stephanie Pui-Mun Law

"Want to plant something."

"How about we make Play-Doh cookies, sweetie? Would you like me to roll out Play-Doh for you?"

"Want to plant another punkmin."

"There isn't room for more punkmins—*pumpkins*. We already planted three pumpkin hills."

"Want to plant moaning glowies." Morning glories. I looked beyond the garden, at the chain-link fence that bordered the neighbor's yard. Well, we hadn't planted over there yet; why not?

"We'll have to go buy seeds," I said.

"We can go to the garden store!" Isabella said brightly, and ran to put on her shoes.

I stepped out onto the back porch while she searched for her sandals. The pumpkins were coming up, their big leaves sprouting off of thick fuzzy vines. So were the carrots, the eggplants, the cucumbers, the beans—*all* the beans, even the ones that Isabella had dropped on top of the dirt—the lavender, and the mustard greens. Of all the things my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter had insisted on planting, I thought the mustard greens were probably the weirdest. At least with the eggplant, I could understand why the big purple globes on the seed packet had caught her eye. Mustard greens weren't flowers, they weren't purple, and they weren't something she usually ate. But she'd thrown an absolute fit when I'd tried to slip those seeds back into the seed rack, so into our cart they went.

I had stopped pretending that the patch of dirt out behind our house was my garden anymore. And really, that was just as well. Gardening—*fertility*, I joked to my husband Charlie, on those rare days when I had a sense of humor about it—had never really been my thing. Seeds I planted did not sprout. Flowers withered. Tomatoes stayed green on the vine right up until frost. As an experiment, during one of those bitter, bitter summers before I managed to get pregnant with Isabella, I planted *five* zucchini hills and got not a single fruit.

Well, I did get Isabella. It just took four years of trying. Fertility charting, invasive tests, Clomid, injectables, and finally, *in vitro*. But we had our baby.

"Want to plant cabbage!"

Isabella came trotting back, her sandals fastened neatly onto the wrong feet, a naked baby doll under one arm, and a big smile on her face. "*Now* we can go to the garden store!" she announced, so I got my purse, and we walked down to the little neighborhood shop where they knew Isabella by name.

* * * *

Isabella headed straight for the revolving seed rack. "Hang me up," she said, lifting her arms. I lifted her up so that she could reach the top of the rack, and watched as she selected three varieties of morning glories—blue, purple, and white—plus more seed packets on her way down. I flipped through her selections: climbing black-eyed Susans, climbing snapdragons, trumpet vine, scarlet runner beans. She'd decided to go along with the "decorate the fence" theme, apparently. Well, she'd also grabbed a package of ornamental kale. And turnips. And cabbage. "You've never even eaten cabbage," I said, holding up the packet. "Or turnips."

"Want to plant cabbage! Want to plant turnips!" She snatched the seed packets and laid them protectively in the cart.

"How about we just plant the kale? I can probably find a spot for the kale."

"Want the kale too."

Well, it was only $1.29 per packet. I sighed and went to pay for our latest pile of seeds.

* * * *

I found places for cabbage and kale and even the turnips, and then we spent the rest of the afternoon planting vine seeds along the fence. Therese, our next-door neighbor, came out to check her mail while Isabella was working. "Quite the little helper you've got there," she said.

"Thank you," I said, thinking that she didn't know the half of it.

"She's a doll. When are you going to give her a baby sister? Do you want a baby sister, sweetheart?"

I ground my teeth and stood up. "Come on, Isabella. Let's go plant more turnips."

Back in the vegetable garden, Isabella dug a furrow with her toddler-sized trowel. "Want a baby sister," she said a few minutes later, carefully dropping seeds into the dirt.

"I don't have one for you, kiddo," I said.

"Want to plant a sister."

That actually made me giggle. "They don't sell that kind of seed at the garden store."

* * * *

I bought Charlie a pound of gourmet jelly beans for Father's Day. He generously shared the flavors he didn't like with Isabella, who didn't care if it was peanut-butter or popcorn flavored as long as it was candy and we were letting her eat it. She ate all of them except for one, a creamy bean with yellow flecks, which she held up and looked at thoughtfully. "Want to plant it," she said.

"It's a jelly bean, not a seed," I said.

"Want to plant the bean."

"Come outside with Daddy," Charlie said generously. "I'll help you plant it." She hopped down from her chair and wrapped her hand around his thumb, her other hand still carefully cradling the bean.

When I first saw the jelly bean vine coming up, I assumed it was a morning glory or something. The leaves were shaped like Valentines, and the color was a light, silvery green. When I took Isabella around the garden and we looked at everything that was coming up, she pointed at it and said, "That's the bean plant."

"The scarlet runner beans?" I asked.

"Daddy's bean," Isabella said.

It flowered the first week of July, and shortly afterwards produced thick pods that looked almost like green beans except that they were the color of cream. I pulled one off immediately out of curiosity, and looked inside; the beans were tiny and immature, but I could see the rainbow of colors tucked inside the pod. I shivered and almost ripped out the whole plant. Then, curiosity overcoming my worry, I tasted one. It was sour, like fruit that needed time to ripen.

By the next day, the pods were as thick as fingers, and Isabella decided it was time to harvest them. We took out a basket and picked all the big yellow-white pods off the plant. Then we took them inside and sat at the dining room table and shucked them, putting the beans in a jar. They'd grown in the full range of flavors. The beans I dropped into the jar were yellow, orange, and cotton-candy pink. I set aside one of the big creamy pods for Charlie to see when he got home, in case he didn't want to believe me.

Even with the pod, he clearly thought it was some sort of elaborate prank. He peeled the pod back, popping a light orange bean into his mouth, and laughed. "Hey, Izzy-Bean, come here, let me give you something." He took a quarter out of his pocket and put it in her hand. "They always told me that money doesn't grow on trees; let's just see if they really know what they're talking about. Let's you and I go outside and plant a money tree and see what comes up."

* * * *

"You aren't seriously telling me it sprouted."

It took just a week of daily watering to get the money tree to sprout.

Charlie thought I must have gone down to the garden store to get some other seedling tree, just to mess with his head.

"And the jelly bean vine?"

"You could've bought jelly beans."

"The *pod* they came in?"

"You aren't seriously telling me it *sprouted*."

"You are seriously not *listening* to me, because that's *exactly* what I'm telling you."

It usually takes fruit trees years to bear fruit, but Isabella's money tree bloomed in early August, though it was only about as tall as she was. The flowers glittered in the sun, and their petals clinked when Isabella picked them. She got out the brass vase I let her use for her cut flowers, and arranged the money flowers in it. I left it at Charlie's place at the table.

Charlie sat down slowly when he saw the money tree flowers. He touched the blooms, making the petals ring like wind chimes.

"Should've had her plant a twenty," I said.

Charlie glanced at me nervously and touched the flower again. Then he took a quarter out of his pocket and compared it. "They're not quite right," he said after a few minutes. "They're a little irregular—the design is right, but they're not perfect circles, and they're a little too small." He looked up. "They definitely won't work in vending machines."

"You're probably right."

"Twenties would probably have some flaw, too. They'd be missing the anti-counterfeiting strip or something."

"Well, it's probably not ethical to spend any of it, anyway," I said, flicking the petal with my fingernail to hear it clink again. "I mean, it *is* counterfeit money. Just because Isabella grew it doesn't make it, you know, kosher to spend." I glanced at Isabella, who was watching Charlie with a sober look on her face, her naked baby doll in her hands. "But it's a beautiful flower, sweetheart. I think Daddy loves his money tree."

"I do, definitely," he said, and lifted her onto his lap.

"Want to spend the money," Isabella said, plucking a petal from the flower and dropping it onto the table.

"What do you want to buy, kiddo?" I asked.

"Want to buy a baby sister..."

* * * *

September came and little green pumpkins were growing on the pumpkin vines. The morning glories covered the fence, blue and purple and white. There were purple eggplants swelling like tiny lilac eggs, and sweet orange carrots, and more cucumbers than we could eat. Isabella carefully scrubbed each turnip and stacked them in a plastic crate in our dining room; I looked up turnip recipes, never having eaten them before.

Therese came over to look at Isabella's garden, and Isabella gave her a tour of the flowers and the

ornamental kale, which theoretically we could have eaten but was such a brilliant red I didn't really want to pick it. "Would you like to give Therese some turnips?" I asked Isabella as we reached the turnip patch.

"Oh, no thank you, I couldn't possibly..."

"You wouldn't reject *Isabella's* turnips, would you? Let me just get you a sack. We have tons." I left her protesting in Isabella's garden.

While I was filling the sack, I saw Isabella showing Therese her carrots and cabbages, and Therese glancing my way and then bending down to whisper something to Isabella. I tossed in an extra turnip and went back outside. They really were *pretty* vegetables, purple and white, but we were never going to be able to eat the two bushels of them Isabella had grown.

Therese glared at me as I handed her the sack, but she thanked Isabella for the kind gift and headed back to her own house. Isabella was looking with sudden new interest at her garden, and I had the bad feeling that she was going to demand to plant something *new*, but instead she went to get her little wheelbarrow so I could help her dig up more turnips.

I had hoped that her interest in her garden would wane a little bit as we got closer to winter—it was going to *snow*, after all, and there was a limit to the number of things we could grow in pots in the house—but if anything, over the next week her interest intensified. As soon as she was out of bed, she wanted to run out and look at it. At the very least she wanted to walk through it before eating her breakfast, clutching a little plastic toy—she seemed to have lost interest in the baby doll, I hadn't seen it in days. We'd come back out after breakfast to pick anything that was ready to harvest, and then she'd want another walk-through in the afternoon.

About a week after Therese's visit, I woke up one morning to a funny noise coming from the backyard. *There's a cat out there*, I thought. Isabella was already up, standing expectantly in the hallway. "Want to go to the garden *now*," she said.

It's not like we can just bring it in and keep it like we'd keep a stray cat.

"Get your clothes on first," I said, yawning, putting on my own blue jeans and sweatshirt. Isabella vanished back into her room, emerging minutes later with her shirt on backwards but otherwise fully dressed. "*Now* we can go to the garden," she insisted.

The cat was still there. We went downstairs and I opened the back door; Isabella sprinted out. "*There's* the baby sister!" she called to me.

Lying beside the cabbage plant, I saw a flash of pink. *She must have left her doll out here*, I thought. But it was moving.

"The cabbage patch," I whispered. *Therese must have told her that babies grew in cabbage patches. And then if she planted the doll...*

The baby in the cabbage patch was crying: a thin little newborn wail. She quieted as I picked her up. Isabella peered at her with interest. I stroked her soft hair, so much like Isabella's, and her tiny toes. She had no belly button. I traced the edges of her stomach, not quite daring to touch the middle, smooth like an egg.

"That's a baby sister," Isabella said.

"Isabella, where did this baby come from?"

"She grew," Isabella said.

"Babies don't grow in gardens, sweetheart. They don't. Whose baby is this?"

Isabella reflected on this for a minute, then said, "*That* baby sister grew in the garden."

I sat down on the porch swing, swaying back and forth, my head spinning. Should I call Charlie? The police? What was I going to say? What am I going to do with this baby? *It's not like we can just bring it in and keep it like we'd keep a stray cat.*

The baby opened its eyes and regarded me for a moment.

*What am I going to do with you?*

Isabella skipped over to lean on my knee, her hands empty. I blinked at her, thinking, *She had a toy when we came outside. Where is it?*

"Want a dragon," Isabella said.

I blinked again, then looked at the yard, at the tangle of pumpkin vines, eggplants, beans, cabbages. *And one dragon. One dragon seed.*

Maybe there would be an early frost.

**Naomi Kritzer** lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband and two daughters. Naomi's older daughter has gotten over her obsession with gardening, which inspired this story, and is now every bit as incompetent at growing things from seeds as Naomi is. Naomi's short stories have appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and *Sword and Sorceress*. Her novels (*Fires of the Faithful*, *Turning the Storm*, *Freedom's Gate*, *Freedom's Apprentice*, and *Freedom's Sisters*) are available from Bantam. Her website is at www.naomikritzer.com.

# Collateral Damage

by Kate Riedel

Which hurts more? To wait for someone who never comes back, or to wait for someone who comes too late?

Illustration by Joe Kovach

My name is Martha Shumacher Denton and one thing you should know about me is that whenever *It's a Wonderful Life* comes on TV at Christmas time, I'm cheering for George Bailey to get the hell out of town before it's too late.

Of course, he doesn't.

Sometimes I fantasize that eventually he murdered his whole family and escaped to the south of France where he passed away quietly at the age of ninety while sunbathing on the Riviera.

Hell, he didn't even have to murder them. Just retire there. With or without his wife. Although I doubt if she would want to.

Robert wouldn't.

How did I ever survive all those years with Robert?

Knitting.

Once it had been Sligo. Canterbury. Paris. Vienna. Cairo. Katmandu. Bangkok... Once upon a time those all had seemed possible. Now it was knit...purl...knit...purl...

Until the Hallowe'en blizzard of 1991 when what went around, came around.

Virg McNally called. Mike and Alison, my teenage grandchildren, had planned a Hallowe'en party, and Jenny—Virg's teenage daughter and a handful, to put it kindly—had run away with Virg's snowmobile across our back pasture in order to come to the party. Which had been cancelled because of the weather. But Jenny had a crush on Mike, so a little thing like a snowstorm wasn't going to stop her.

Robert went out back of the old barn to see if there was any sign of her.

He came back with Peggy.

Peggy, wearing lined jeans, red cable sweater that Mom had made her, matching toque over her braids, black-and-red-checked wool jacket, and those stupid cowboy boots, and stinking of horses, as if it were yesterday.

"Mom?" she said when she saw me. "Why are you living in the pump house and wearing those funny pajamas?"

"It's called a track suit," Robert explained gently. "Your niece and her husband built a granny flat for us where the pump house used to be. And this is your sister Martha."

Peggy didn't cry, but she looked, if possible, even more lost and frightened than she had when she walked in the door.

I didn't hug her, we had never been a huggy family, but I sat her down, helped her off with her boots and jacket, showed her where the shower was and got her one of my nightgowns. While she was taking a shower I heated up some milk and added a lot of chocolate powder and a good two ounces of rum.

"Martha," Robert said, "she's only fifteen years old."

And raised a Methodist. So was I. Things change. "Yeah, and how did you feel when you rode out of your snowstorm?" I left him to think about that while I tucked Peggy into the spare room bed and made her drink all of the hot chocolate in spite of her protests at the taste of the rum.

I was counting on her stomach being empty, and that she would go to sleep quickly with the help of the rum.

"Putting it off won't make it any easier for her," Robert said when I rejoined him in the kitchen.

"It will for me," I said. "Now—what are we going to tell the kids?" If he didn't know before, that I knew, he has to know now. Not that he'll admit it.

"Well," he said after some thought, "we can cover up the fact that she's here, for a day or so. And we can say we had a phone call from an old school friend of yours asking you to take care of—her granddaughter? And take her into town in secret and bring her back openly, as if we'd just picked her up from the train."

"Fine, if you can talk her into doing that. But there's still those damn ponies."

"They're in the old barn. No one ever goes in there."

"They'll have to be fed and watered. Carter will notice you taking hay and straw to them. And then there's all the manure to be got rid of. And then what? She brought them along on the train?"

"I think I know," he said after a few minutes more thought, and got up and put on his boots and jacket and went out.

Maybe he'll get lost in the snowstorm and then Jennifer McNally will turn up here on the snowmobile—which won't solve the problem of Peggy.

What Robert did, he told me when he came back in, was lead the mare and filly round-about back into the woods and shut them in the old sugar shack. He was going to go back the same way in the morning and turn them loose and head them toward the barn, so they'd look as if they'd strayed here during the snowstorm, but in the end they saved him the trouble by breaking out early in the morning and finding their own way back home.

I didn't sleep well, but Peggy was still awake before me the next morning. Worrisome—what if she'd decided to go over to the main house? But I found her in the living room, reading yesterday's newspaper. The comics.

Is this really the St. Paul Pioneer Press?" she asked. "This says it's 'Steve Roper,' but who's Mike Nomad? How did Steve Roper get out of the hotel room where he was being held prisoner? Where's 'Li'l Abner'? What happened in the Sadie Hawkins Day race?"

"Check the date on the paper," I said. "Mom and Dad are dead. I'm nearly sixty, and I have three children—had, I mean, because Hubbard was killed in Vietnam—and five grandchildren. My older daughter Lorena and her husband Carter now own the farm, they bought it from us when Robert retired."

Brutal, but so what? She didn't

watch Mom and Dad get old before their time with grief over a son killed in Normandy, a daughter lost in a blizzard. She didn't have to care for them at home, find a nursing home when things got too hard, arrange for their funerals.

Then I felt guilty. How would I have felt, in her place?

Young...

Lorena came in the front door and I hustled Peggy into the bedroom just in time.

"Mom? Virg called again, Jenny never turned up. They're getting together a search party. I offered to feed them, there's all the pizza we had ready for the party, can you manage coffee?"

"Just let me get dressed. I'll be right over."

"I'll come, Lori," Robert said, coming from the kitchen. "I'll bring the spare coffee maker. Who's organizing the search?" All the while getting the coffee maker out of the cupboard and pulling on his jacket and boots.

When he was gone, Peggy came out of the bedroom, and jumped as a snowmobile roared past the window.

"Do you want some breakfast?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"Don't get the sulks on me."

"I'm not sulking!" Just like old times....

I sat down and picked up my knitting.

"You don't knit, Marty."

"I didn't knit."

"Why do you now?"

To keep my hands busy so I don't wring anybody's neck.... "Oh, I guess because I'm a grandmother."

"Oh, Marty! You aren't like that! You never knit! You're too busy studying French and German and reading travel books, National Geographic. 'Those faraway places, with strange-sounding names...' That's your favourite song. I was singing that, out in the storm. It made me feel warmer. And you're going to Germany, after New Year's—you've got that job at the army base." Pause. "Oh. I keep forgetting." What, that I look like Mom? "You did go, didn't you?"

I went on knitting.

"Didn't you go anywhere at all?"

Not even on my honeymoon. Not even on our silver wedding anniversary....

"Look," I said. "Just sit down and tell me what happened to you."

Then maybe I'll know about Robert, too. Where was he for—what?—Eighty-five years?

"You know what happened," she said, "you were there. You drove me over to the McNallys' after Virg's mom called to say the ponies had got across the slough and were in their yard, we took Nell's saddle and bridle and a lead rope for Patches in the trunk, and then you went on into town to pick up some groceries for Mom."

To keep my hands busy so I don't wring anybody's neck....

"I mean after that," I said. "I don't know what happened after that. Come on now, it might make you feel better."

She stared at me a minute and then collapsed on the couch, and I put down my knitting and waited.

"Well," she said finally. "You dropped me off."

"Yes." I remembered backing the Plymouth out of the McNallys' driveway and into the road, and waving as I took off for town, hoping we were both well enough ahead of the storm—that was the blizzard of December 4, 1950. The last I saw of Peggy, she was waving back, holding the bridle and rope, with the saddle at her feet.

"So Virg came out of the house just after you left, and he told me he would have taken care of the ponies for me, with the storm coming and all, and his mom had said I could stay overnight if I wanted. But I said Dad needed me to help with the milking. And then I got kind of embarrassed, because I remembered what you'd told me..."

"What?" I asked when she paused.

"That boys don't care for girls who act like boys." And she blushed.

I don't remember that... Now I really feel guilty—not about telling her that, but because Peggy was the one to take up the slack around the barn, when she was just ten or eleven, after Tim was killed in the war. But Peggy liked helping in the barn. I never did.

"Well, anyway, Virg held Nell while I saddled her—what are those things?" as another snowmobile roared into the yard.

"Snowmobiles, they have treads, and little skis on the front, and motors. They'll be using them to search for Jenny."

"Who's Jenny?"

"Virg's daughter. She tried to come over here last night, and got lost."

"Virg's..." she gulped and hurried on. "Virg liked the ponies, even though you told me boys don't like horsy girls. And before I left he invited me to their sledding party."

I hadn't known about the sledding party. It must have been cancelled because of the search for Peggy.

"He said I was the first one he'd asked. I remembered you'd said you'd give me a perm during Christmas vacation, and I thought that would be in time for me to have curls instead of braids for the party. And then I got on Nell and he handed me Patches's lead, and I rode out of the yard, and found the place they'd crossed the road, and started to follow their tracks back home.

"It was easy at first, because their tracks were pretty plain, and it didn't start to snow until we were alongside the woods. But then it started, and it got heavy in a hurry. I wondered if you were going to have a hard time getting back from town."

"I stayed overnight with Nancy Olson," I said.

"Oh. Well, Nell kept my legs warm but my feet were getting cold, and it got dark and I couldn't see much past the ponies. That's when I started singing, all the songs I could remember. Patches was starting to get ice on her whiskers. And then Nell sort of tripped, and recovered herself, and I looked down and saw that she'd tripped on a snowed-over muskrat house, so I knew we were on the slough, so we were over halfway home.

"And then I knew we couldn't be far, because I could hear Dad yelling

my name. He...he's really dead?" I nodded. "So that was the last time I'll ever... Anyway," she gulped again, "I yelled back."

"He said he never got an answer."

"We were riding into the wind. Of course, that could have made Dad's voice sound closer that it really was.

"Then I saw a light, and at first I thought it was Dad with the flashlight, but then I saw it was someone on a big dark horse, with a lantern on the saddle, riding away from me. I didn't know who it could be, nobody else in the neighbourhood has—had—riding horses, but at least he had a light, so I yelled for him to wait, but he didn't, and more snow blew up, and I couldn't see him anymore.

"But that was okay, because then I saw the barn, there was a light on, and we kind of ploughed our way up to the back door. I had to hang onto the saddle when I slid off Nell, my legs were so stiff, but I managed to reach the door handle and pull. There was a lot of snow in the way, but we made it in, and I was so relieved."

That was all? No flying saucers? No little grey men with big eyes?

"I was a little surprised Dad wasn't there, but he'd left hay and a bucket of water." Robert did know.

"I got the saddle off Nell and went to get her brushes, and that was when I realized the barn was empty. And I got scared, and the brush and curry comb were all dusty and rusty, and then someone said, 'Sorry about that, but they haven't been used since I sold Tennie, and that was forty years ago.' And I didn't know who he was, or who Tennie was..."

Peggy wouldn't know what was going on. At least you know. Try to remember that. Remember that you've had twenty years to get used to Mom and Dad being dead....

A cold draft as the door opened and closed, Robert stomping the snow from his boots before pulling them off.

I reached for my knitting.

"That's a pretty little pinto mare," Robert said, sitting down next to Peggy. "Maybe some Welsh blood in her?"

"I don't really know," Peggy answered. "I won her in a raffle at the county fair."

Right, all either of them can think about is horses...knit...knit...purl...

"I didn't even know she was pregnant," Peggy went on. "Patches was a real surprise."

"Patches is the filly? What's the mare's name?"

For God's sake, you know all that. Knit...purl...purl...

"Nell," said Peggy. "She was such a skinny thing, and her coat was all dull when I got her, and Mom..." It's in her eyes, realizing Mom's dead too.... "Mom said I should name her Little Nell because I'd done right by her..."

"Patches looks as if she's going to be fairly good-sized when she gets her growth."

"That's what Dad..."

Not doing much better than I am, Robert.... I went on knitting.

"You ever ridden a big horse?" Robert asked quickly. Peggy shook her head. "You should try a Tennessee walker sometime. A stride that eats up the miles, and so smooth it's like sitting in a big rocking chair." Peggy was still fighting tears. He went on, "That's what Tennie was. Got her cheap from a family that needed the money, they'd lost nearly everything in the war. I rode her home—"

Go ahead, tell her how I made you sell the damned animal.

"I've known for a long time that it was no accident."

"From the war?" asked Peggy. "Wouldn't you have to bring her on a ship? And even then, you'd have to take the train..."

"Oh, well, they, uh..."

I threw down the knitting. "Will you come off it, Robert? The doctor may have swallowed that story about the mine ball he dug out of your shoulder coming from an old accident with an antique gun, but I've known for a long time that it was no accident."

I went into the bedroom and got dressed. I didn't look at them when I came out and crossed the living room to the hall, but I could hear him say, "...Nashville..." and Peggy saying, "But there weren't any battles in the United States, except Pearl Harbor..."

Let him give the history lesson. I pulled on my coat and boots and went out and across to the old house, where a couple of state troopers were already organizing a bunch of neighbors for a snowmobile search, and there were more neighbors inside. I hadn't been in the kitchen two minutes when Alison burst in the door yelling, "Guess what! There's horses out by the old barn!"

"Not now, Alison," Lorena said.

"But there's horses! Two of them!"

"Alison, they aren't ours. Leave them alone and they'll find their own way back to where they belong, and if they don't, we'll advertise. But right now Jennifer McNally—"

"Oh, Jennifer." Alison made a face and banged back out the door.

"Anything I can do?" I asked.

"There isn't that much, really. Dad started the coffee, and I have all the stuff we'd got for the party, if people need something to eat. Carter and Mike are already out on skis looking for her. That idiot girl, just like her mother..."

"Her father's nice," I said, thinking of Peggy.

"But he doesn't have any influence over her."

The men trailed out, except for one state trooper who stayed to operate some kind of radio set up in the living room. I made Lorena sit down and drink some coffee while I mopped up dirty snow and loaded dishes into the washer until the last snowmobile had roared off.

Robert and Peggy were still in the living room when I got back, Robert pretending to read the newspaper and Peggy sitting on the cedar chest that served as our coffee table and staring at the family photos on the wall: my three's high school graduation photos, Mom and Dad's fortieth wedding anniversary, our twenty-fifth, wedding pictures—me and Robert, Lorena and Carter, Linda and Jimmy. School photos of the grandkids. Hubbard in his uniform.

"Alison found the ponies," I said.

"Alison?" Peggy asked.

"Your great-niece. Our granddaughter. About two years younger than you. So what have you two been talking about?"

"The freezing rain at Nashville," said Robert, "and how long it takes to ride a horse from Tennessee to Minnesota. Peggy says she saw me just before she came out of the storm."

"What did you see in there?" I asked Robert. I know, now. But I want you to tell me....

"Someone walking ahead of me, it looked as if he was carrying a deer across his shoulders. Really, except for getting onto the old wagon track that ran past the woods across the road from McNally's, that's all I can remember, seeing him, wondering what he was doing out hunting in that weather, and then he disappeared and I saw the barn."

"Excuse me," I said, and Peggy got up off the cedar chest so I could open it and dig down under the blankets until I found the brown paper package I'd wrapped and taped in 1958 and hadn't looked at since. I sat down beside Robert, found the scissors in my knitting basket and cut open the package.

On top was a small leather-bound copy of Sonnets from the Portuguese.

"Where did you get that?" Robert snatched it from me and opened it to the flyleaf. Awkward letters in browned ink read, "To Martha, until I come back. Robert."

"Same place I found these." I opened the Fanny Farmer chocolates box to show a tintype of a young man standing straight in his double-breasted uniform of the Minnesota Fifth Volunteers, pistol tucked in his belt, rifle at his side. I'd seen that pistol, that rifle, and perhaps the uniform coat.

Under it was a photo of a straight-backed, straight-mouthed young woman in a plain dark, long dress.

"She looks like you, Marty," said Peggy.

"She's our great-grandmother on the Schumacher side."

Robert looked at that one for a long time. "She was so pretty when she smiled," he said, finally. "Like the sun coming out. Where did you find these? When?"

"Back in 1958 when June Allsop was looking for material for the state centennial exhibit she put together at the library. She asked me if I had anything, and I said I'd look. I found these in a box up in the attic."

I picked up the packet of letters under the photos and opened the one on top. Her writing was neater than his.

"It's dated 1865," I said, and then read aloud, "'I am writing because it's Valentine's Day, but I won't be able to send this for a while because we've just had a big blizzard.'" I stopped and looked at Robert.

"I was crossing the frozen slough only the night before," he said miserably.

"'I am writing this in care of your Regiment,'" I read on, "'although I hope you have been mustered out by now and are on your way home. We did not lose any stock in the blizzard, but when Father went out to check on the cattle he found an Indian in the pump house, butchering a deer! He locked the Indian in and as soon as the snow let up sent Billy for the Sheriff. We do not want to take any chances, after all the terrible things that happened in the Uprising.'"

I broke off here to say, "I checked local histories, but I never did find out what happened to the Indian. I suppose the best he could hope for was to be shipped off to the Dakotas. He might not even have been Sioux—heaven knows what year, what century, he wandered into that quantum anomaly in our back pasture."

"Into that what?" asked Peggy.

"I forget, you missed *Star Trek*. Along with Elvis, Kennedy, Vietnam, Watergate, and *Star Wars*, both the movie and the defence policy."

Peggy looked confused. Get used to it....

"I was relieved of duty after Nashville," said Robert. "Because of the shoulder wound."

"I know," I said. "Colonel Hubbard told her all about it. He returned the letter to her, with a note telling her you'd been discharged, adding that he was afraid you might have taken passage on the Sultana, and that he would pray for both of you."

"What are the rest of them?"

"Your letters to her. She kept them all, even after she married Frank Shumacher. I didn't read them. And I didn't give any of them to June. Because I knew even then they were yours." I handed them to Robert.

> "I found these in a box up in the attic."

The door burst open and someone called, "Bob? I can't stand waiting anymore. Can I borrow your..."

He stopped in the living room door and stared at Peggy. She stared back.

"Sorry," he said, "You look an awful lot like..." he shook his head. "Can I borrow your snowmobile, Bob? I have to get in on this or I'll go crazy."

"Sure," said Robert. "Keys on the nail by the door. The tank's full."

"Thanks." He looked one last time at Peggy, then grabbed the keys and left.

"Who was that?" asked Peggy.

"Virg."

"He looks old!" she wailed.

"He's fifty-seven and looks older. He married late and married badly."

"Who? Who did he marry?"

"No one you know."

Another cold draft, and Alison came down the hall and into the living room without bothering to take off her boots, giving us no time to get Peggy out of the way.

Alison stared. Then grinned.

"Omigod!" she said. "Did they take you on a flying saucer? Did they do experiments on you? Did they take the horses, too?"

*Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and Roswell... "Alison—"

"It's all right, Grandma. I figured it out. I knew I'd seen those horses before!" She held out a photo album that I thought had been long forgotten. Apparently not by Alison.

"Look!" She flipped it open, and there were all the Brownie photos I'd

taken of Peggy and the ponies after Patches was born. Peggy standing between them, Peggy hugging Patches, Peggy sitting on Nell while Patches chewed on the toe of her boot. "See? I checked out the pinto patterns. They're exactly the same! And that's you! You're my Aunt Peggy!"

"Alison, come into the kitchen. I need to talk to you. I think," I added to Robert, "that your clever plan is starting to disintegrate."

"It's okay, Marty," said Peggy. "I don't mind her knowing."

"I do," I said. "I don't think just now is the time to spring you on Lori and Carter."

"But Grandma! This means we can keep the horses! Oh," she turned to Peggy, "I mean, I know they're yours, but would you let me help with them? Pleee-ease?"

I'm surrounded by horse-crazy idiots... But, on the other hand, it was maybe time Robert and I had another talk alone.

"Are you sure you don't mind, Peggy?"

"No, I don't. Anyway, I should go out and see how they are. I'll show you how to brush them and put the saddle on Nell," she said to Alison.

"Make sure no one's around before you go out the door. And no riding," I said. "And Alison, don't you go telling anyone else about this until you've talked to me, I don't care if it's a day from now or a week from now."

"Should I call you Aunt Peggy?" I heard Alison say as they went out the door, and Peggy answering, "Just Peggy is okay," and Alison saying, "Omigod! I can't believe it!" Although apparently she did. Was that good or bad?

I watched out the kitchen window until they were safely out of sight in the old barn. Robert followed me into the kitchen and I could hear him putting on coffee, pulling out a chair to sit at the table.

I turned and looked down at him. "Now what?" I said.

He shrugged. "She can finish high school, maybe go on to college, take it from there, like any other kid. She'll figure things out. I did."

"You were a grown man, and farming hadn't changed that drastically yet, and Mom and Dad needed someone like you badly just then, so they didn't ask a lot of questions. By the time the search for Peggy was over and done with, people had accepted you as just a war veteran with a bit of a memory problem, never mind which war. And paperwork wasn't as important then. But it is now. What will she do for a birth certificate? She's still a minor. That's all going to blow up in our faces if we try to enroll her in school here. They may even take her away from us. And even if they don't—"

"This is her home."

"It's Lori and Carter's farm. We signed the papers, remember? She's not their responsibility, and I won't let her become their responsibility, it's not fair to them."

"There's no need for that. I promised your mom and dad that if she ever turned up, I'd look after her."

"And our pensions will stretch to feeding a teenager and her horses? And clothing, and educating her? Not to mention doctors' bills? And vet bills too. I don't think so."

"She'll have plenty of money."

"From where?"

I'm surrounded by horse-crazy idiots...

"From Tennie. When I sold her, after you made me realize how much it hurt your parents to have a riding horse around, reminding them of Peggy—"

Here's where I should be feeling guilty again, but I can't. It was hard on Mom and Dad, but I was the one who hated that horse. Somehow she came to represent all I had given up—my job in Germany, travel, independence....

"—I put the money into a savings account, and later I got some advice, and invested it. There were other things, too. My uniform tunic. It had seen a lot of hard wear, but the moths hadn't had a chance at it, and with dry-cleaning it looked okay. The coins I'd had in my pockets. My army kit, my pistol and rifle. Even the ammunition. The lantern. Tennie's saddle—that was a Confederate cavalry saddle I bought at the same time I bought her." Is it a relief for him finally to be able to talk about it?

"None of it, except for Tennie, was worth much when I rode north, but as Civil War memorabilia, they were all worth at least a little something, some more than a little—the saddle even had the officer's name stamped on the underside of the pommel, and it was authenticated, which increased its value. I invested the money from those, too. Kept it diversified, to be safe. Some of it's in bonds in our safe deposit box, some in mutual funds, some in gold, and there's a savings account for the interest to be paid into. So after around thirty years there's plenty for Peggy."

"How much?"

He told me.

"You son-of-a-bitch," I said. "You goddamn son-of-a-bitch. We could have gone to Paris! We could have toured Europe! And taken a cruise around the goddamn world! Twice! And still had money left over!"

"But Martha—"

"All. These. Years," I said. "All these goddamn years, first because of Mom and Dad, then because of the kids, then because of Dad after Mom died. And all the time you were telling me we goddamn couldn't afford it. And when I said I wanted to go to Paris for our silver wedding anniversary, you treated it like a joke. A goddamn joke!"

"But Martha..."

"Don't you 'but Martha' me." Talk about stupid final words. I walked out of the kitchen and into our bedroom.

But I didn't get the last word, because as I braced a chair under the doorknob I heard him say, "I promised your mom and dad. It wasn't for us. It was for Peggy." I flung myself on the bed and buried my face in the pillow and covered my ears like a little kid in denial.

After a while I rolled over and lay there thinking. There was bound to be another blizzard, maybe even this winter, and if I could find the right spot to walk into it, then Jennifer

could buzz out the other side. Who knew what year it would be when I walked out again?

I heard Peggy come in, heard her talking quietly with Robert.

I thought some more. Go into a blizzard and come out still sixty years old with all the aches and pains, not to mention unemployability? Sure, they might have discovered how to reverse age by the time I came out, but it was bound to be expensive, and nobody was going to set up any kind of fund for me in the interim. Besides, with my luck, things would be so bad by then that anybody over sixty would automatically be euthanized. And either way, I'd still be stuck here.

I finally went to sleep.

I was wakened by the sound of snowmobiles leaving the yard. It was evening. I sat there in the dark, thinking some more, before getting up and taking the chair out from under the doorknob.

Robert was watching TV.

"Where's Peggy?"

"She went to bed. She watched TV for a while, but I think it kind of disturbed her."

"Did you have supper?"

"Bacon and eggs. Don't tell Lori," he smiled. "Do you want something?"

"I'll fix myself a sandwich. Robert... I'm sorry I lost my temper." Please, don't strike me dead for lying. "You were only doing the right thing."

"It's okay. You had a hard day."

"We all did. Anyway, I'm sorry." Twice. And I'm still not struck by lightning.

Robert followed me into the kitchen. "They've about finished the search for Jenny," he said as I slid bread and cheese under the broiler. "At least for today. They'll be back tomorrow to expand it, just to be sure. But the police are afraid she went into the slough, the ice wouldn't be that thick, and snow would cover it up after. And the silt underneath would be just like quicksand."

They'd tried to convince Mom and Dad that Peggy and the horses had gone into the slough. But the ice was thick by then, we'd been skating on it since Thanksgiving.

I pulled out my sandwich, slid it onto a plate, cut it in half, and sat down to eat.

"I've been thinking," I said. "About your plan to pretend Peggy came in on the train."

"Maybe that wasn't such a good idea."

"I don't know. The way you set it up for Alison to find the ponies, it's fooled Lori and Carter, if not Alison, and how many people will believe Alison? Just tweak it a bit. I could be meeting a friend and her granddaughter in Minneapolis."

"You were only doing the right thing."

"What about that paperwork you were talking about?"

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it. There's ways to get false birth certificates, even if we have to pay for it. And you said there's money."

He nodded.

"So Peggy and I can take the bus to Minneapolis, and stay there a week, and come back. That will give me a chance to get her some new clothes. Doing it here in town might raise some questions about why she only has what she's wearing."

"And I can take you to the bus depot in Brainerd so no one we know will see Peggy with you when you leave."

"I'd never have thought of that." Still no lightning. I'm on a roll.

"What about money?"

"I can max out the credit card."

"You'll need cash. I can get you a couple thousand from the savings account. Think that will cover hotel bills? Maybe double that. Hotels can be kind of expensive, and she'll need a lot of clothes, judging by Alison."

"Whatever you think is appropriate."

"Heck, treat yourself to something." I intend to. "Martha? Would you like to go somewhere, maybe next summer? Maybe the Stratford Festival, up in Canada. Make a week of it. You like Shakespeare."

"Oh, Robert, that would be nice!"

"I...I guess I owe you a little something, Martha." I guess you do. He watched me finish my sandwich. "Do you think Alison can keep her mouth shut?"

"If Peggy threatens to withdraw pony privileges," I said, and Robert laughed.

So two days later Peggy and I boarded the bus in Brainerd. It had been a tense couple of days, keeping Peggy out of sight, but the search—unsuccessful, of course—for Jennifer had kept people occupied, and the return to the normal school week after the blizzard helped too.

Robert and Alison had looked after the ponies. Mike and Carter teased Alison about being horse-crazy, and Lori kept warning her not to get too attached to them because someone was bound to claim them. Alison grinned at that, but she kept her mouth shut.

Peggy protested at first, and who could blame her? Her horses were the only familiar things left for her. But she saw that not everyone would believe in Alison's flying saucers, and that there would be questions. So she spent the time watching TV, learning to use the washer and dryer and dishwasher, the food processor and freezer and microwave. She didn't talk a lot, even when Alison came over to spend time with her, to tell her about what she was doing in school, and talk about the ponies.

I showed Peggy how conditioner kept the static electricity out of her hair, and how to use my hair dryer. "We can get you a haircut in Minneapolis," I said. "Short hair will be easier to take care of."

"That will be nice," she said, almost sadly.

"You'll be all right by yourself?" I asked Robert as we waited for the bus.

"With all the groceries you bought yesterday I could survive another blizzard," he said.

I knit, most of the way to Minneapolis, and Peggy looked out the window most of the time.

Once she said, "Alison says there must be a time warp over the slough, and it can only hold one thing at a time."

"More like one unit," I said.

"Robert had a horse, and you had two, but you were both riding and you were connected to Patches by the lead rope."

"Alison says we should get some scientists out to look it over."

"No, we shouldn't." A quantum anomaly in the back pasture is bad enough, we don't need the National Enquirer too.

"Marty...why did you marry Robert?"

"I guess because I knew Mom and Dad really needed someone like him around, after losing Tim in the war and you in the snowstorm. All right," I said, as she looked at me in obvious disbelief. "He was kind of romantic, you know, the mysterious stranger with the war wound and the memory damage. And he seemed to be in love with me, so I was willing to think I was in love with him." But he was really in love with great-grandmother. And I looked like her, but I wasn't her. And I only thought I was in love. "And it made Mom and Dad happy, because it kept the farm in the family."

Peggy was silent for some time, then she said, "Alison swears a lot. Does she say words like that in front of her mother?"

"Not too much, but all kids talk like that these days."

"Mom and Dad would never have let us say the things she does. I think—thought—it was brave of Virg to say 'darn' to the teacher. Alison says a lot worse than that."

Silence again, for a while.

Then, "Alison says her dad has 300 cows. So many they don't even have names."

"There's other dairy farmers that have more. Farming's changed."

We had lunch in the bus station in Minneapolis, and Peggy was shocked at the price of a hamburger, so I spent most of lunch explaining inflation to her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I'm going to cost you a lot of money until I can get a job or something."

"Well, like Robert Frost said, home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in. We'll take you in, and you'll have enough." And I told her what Robert had done.

She didn't say anything about the number of non-white people in the restaurant, including our waitress, as we'd been brought up to be polite, but she looked. I waited until we were in our hotel room to give her a brief social history of the second half of the twentieth century. All she said to that was, "But that's good, isn't it?"

I suggested a movie for the evening, before remembering that the last one she'd seen had been Francis the Talking Mule. JFK would have meant nothing to her, and I thought she probably wasn't ready for Thelma & Louise, and might find Disney's Beauty and the Beast childish. So we went to The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe, which I enjoyed but which left Peggy bemused.

Back in the hotel room, while she was taking a shower, I took a thick brown envelope from my suitcase and dumped the contents on my bed to examine them.

For a few minutes, the day before, I'd thought I wasn't going to be able to get into the safe deposit box, as it was in Robert's name, but Janet at the bank knew us both and was happy to relax to rules when I told her that Robert had forgotten to get something important from it. Hope she doesn't get into trouble....

"Alison says we should get some scientists out to look it over."

I had hoped there would be more in bonds, but with care there would be enough, and I didn't want to deprive Peggy entirely. At the bottom was an old envelope, with a note written on the back in the same kind of brown ink that had been on the envelopes in the Fanny Farmer box. I picked it up for a closer look. "December...1864. Sold to Lt. Rbt. Denton, 1 mare, 4 yrs old..."

The bill of sale for Tennie. I wouldn't have believed Robert could be so sentimental, but he had loved that damned horse, maybe even more than Peggy loved her ponies. More, I was pretty sure, than he had loved me.

I turned it over. The envelope had been mailed from Knoxville. The address, in spidery handwriting, meant nothing, except that it was probably that of Tennie's original owner.

I slid it back into the brown envelope along with the bonds, then pulled it out again, looked at it closely, and made a note on the hotel pad before sliding it back and putting it all away.

I didn't realize I was humming until Peggy came out of the shower and joined in.

They call me a dreamer, well maybe I am,

But I know that I'm burning to see

Those faraway places, with the strange-sounding names...

* * * *

During the rest of the week I introduced Peggy to malls and fast food courts and fashions that she found a little dubious at first, especially designer jeans, but on the whole she enjoyed shopping as much as any teenage girl once she got into it. We went to movies, and to the Science Museum, and the Guthrie Theater and Walker Art Gallery and Como Zoo, and to the public library, where Peggy learned about personal computers while I looked at Scott's.

I hadn't known that some Confederate cities, including Knoxville, had set up their own post offices. Confederate provisional covers tend to be very rare. And very valuable. A ten-cent Knoxville provisional cover was among the rarest. No need to sell and invest the money; keep it in a safe place and it would appreciate all on its own.

No, Robert, you aren't sentimental. And yes, Robert, you owe me....

That old envelope with Tennie's bill of sale written on the back would increase my little stake very nicely.

Our last evening in Minneapolis we had dinner in the most highly recommended, not to mention expensive, restaurant I could locate, but it was largely wasted as I found I had no

appetite, and Peggy had none either. Peggy refused a glass of wine from the bottle I'd ordered, and looked on in repressed horror, like a good little Methodist, as I finished it off glass by glass, hoping it would give me the courage to tell her she'd be heading home alone tomorrow.

It didn't.

I still had not told her by the time we were back in the hotel and we had both showered and were ready for bed. Peggy was already under the covers.

I seriously considered breaking into that ridiculously expensive little bar they tempt you with in hotel rooms. Instead I went to bed.

I did not sleep. Now's a fine time to start feeling guilty...putting it off won't make it any easier for her...

It will for me. Tell her once she's on the bus, and then run like hell....

Peggy was crying. Even on Hallowe'en night, even when she realized that Mom and Dad had been dead for more years than she had apparently been alive, even when she saw the boy she'd been more than half in love with was now an old and unhappy man, overnight, as far as she was concerned, she had managed to hold back the tears.

"Peggy?" I said, turning on the light.

She burrowed under the blanket until only her newly cropped hair showed.

"Peggy..." What does one say in such a situation? Stupid as it always sounds, what one says is, "Are you all right?" So that's what I said. And, of course, got no answer.

What the hell. Forty years ago I was just somebody's sister. Now I was a mother and grandmother—and I look like her mother, even if I'm not....

I got up and took her in my arms. Let her make believe I'm her mother, if it makes her feel better....

She calmed down at last, and then she said, "Marty?" Not "Mother...." "Oh, Marty, I'm scared!"

"Oh, Peggy! Of what?"

"Of time," she snuffled. "You know...when we were on the bus coming down here? I'd think to myself, in a couple of hours we'll be in the Cities. But I'm not in the Cities now, I'm on the bus, here. But in a couple of hours we'll be in the Cities and I won't be here, here will be gone. Forever!"

She snuffled again. "Does that make sense? Because right now nothing makes sense. Less than two weeks ago I was riding through a snowstorm and thinking about Virg, and about getting home and having supper. And I never did! Less than two weeks ago

Forty years ago I was just somebody's sister.

you were young and so pretty and I was so jealous because you were smart, and pretty, and the boys liked you, and you had a job, a job in Germany! I didn't want to go to Germany, but I did want to be smart and pretty and have Virg like me. I couldn't be Tim, but I thought, if Virg liked me, maybe some day—you know—I might—we might—"

"I think you might have," I said. "Virg went on looking for you for a long time after everyone else gave up, and he didn't get married until he was forty. Everyone thought he was just going to be an old bachelor farmer."

"Did he?" she looked up. "But that doesn't do either of us any good now."

What was Robert looking forward to when he rode into that storm the night before Valentine's Day in 1865? Would it have made a difference if he'd told me? But he didn't.

"And Marty," she went on, "You didn't get to do any of the things you wanted! You never went to Germany, you never visited London, or Paris, or Shanghai, or any of those places you always talked about, and it was all my fault!"

"I hardly think you rode into a quantum anomaly on purpose," I said, and she managed a smile. "And I'm glad I could be here for you." My God, I mean that! I really do!

We sat side by side for several minutes, and then I said, "Look, we've got to catch a bus tomorrow." Here we go again. Me and George Bailey. Maybe I can even get that stuff back in the safe deposit box before Robert knows it's gone. "We'll go home, and get you started in school, and everything will be fine. Really. You have your whole life ahead of you, and it will be a good one, I know. It was for Robert, and he skipped over twice as many years as you did."

She lay down again and pulled up the blankets. "I hope that when Virg's daughter comes back, there's someone there for her. Good night."

"Good night."

She sat up again. "No! I don't want to go back! It's not my home anymore! And I don't want to go to school. It will be awful, I know, because there's so much I don't know, and other kids will laugh at me, and I think probably a lot of those things I won't like when I do know them. It'll be like being somewhere I don't know the language. I think I'd rather be somewhere I don't know the language, because then I'd be expected to make mistakes, and nobody would think I was stupid or crazy, they'd just say, 'oh, she doesn't know the language.'"

She flopped back down on the bed.

I stood and looked down at her. "Do you really mean that?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Think about it."

"Yes!"

I reached for the phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"The airport. I thought I'd check on flights to Montreal." And cancel a flight to Paris.

"Why Montreal?"

"For one thing, they speak French there. For another, you don't have a passport. Yet. We can take it from there." I wonder if Alison would lend us her birth certificate? "If you're willing, because I'm afraid that I'm going to be the one costing you a lot of money. You're still too young to go places on your own. And I'm at the age where, yeah, I'm pretty healthy, but if things start to go downhill, they can go in a hurry, and that would be an awful thing for you to get stuck with. So think about it. Do you still want to?"

"I don't have to think about it. I've

been thinking about it all week!"

"All right. Since it's your money, it's your choice. Where would you like to go after Montreal? Someplace with horses?"

This time she did take a few minutes to think. "Someplace where cows still have names instead of numbers," she said finally.

"How about," I said, without having to think at all, "the south of France?"

**Kate Riedel** grew up in Minnesota, where she wanted to move to New York and write stories for the *Saturday Evening Post* (that tells you how old she is). Instead she moved to Toronto and has written stories published in *On Spec, Not One of Us, Realms of Fantasy, Anotherrealm,* and anthologies *New Writings in the Fantastic* (Pendragon Press), and *Lilith Unbound* (Popcorn Press), and most recently in *A capella Zoo.*

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# Snake in the Grass

by W. R. Thompson — Illustration by James A. Owen

It can take an eternity to figure out your relationship with your parents.

There were signs in the heavens when Dad died. Or *a* sign: Betelgeuse, the brightest star in Orion, went supernova that night. It got live coverage on all the news channels, although I hardly noticed. Dad's liver cancer took over that night and took him before morning. Months of chemotherapy and reassuring prognoses from his doctors ended as abruptly as a step off a cliff.

The paperwork got me through the next few days. Insurance forms, the death certificate, hospital bills, mortuary and funeral arrangements. I've always done well with paperwork, especially when it involves forms. Even Dad had noticed that when I was in grade school. I would ace a fill-in-the-blank or multiple-guess test, and he'd say, *Too bad you can't do this well on the essay exams.* He told me it proved I wasn't a people person.

After the funeral I found a bar, a nice dark place laid out like a labyrinth. I got a booth so I could drink alone, then ordered a sandwich so it wouldn't look like I had come here just to drink. Not that anyone would care much, either way, about my bad habits. Or about the way I'd bungled three marriages and several shack-ups, an alarming score for a man still under thirty. I would have sold my soul for five minutes of solid paternal advice.

"I shouldn't say this, but you could negotiate a better deal."

I looked at the rattlesnake that slithered onto my table. "Huh?" I asked. I hadn't known I was this drunk.

"You could work on your elocution, too," the snake said. "Satan, Mr. Larabie, Satan. At your service."

"An' you're here to buy my soul." The Devil. It had been that kind of a day. "What's the going price for an accountant's soul?"

"Quite high, for an honest one like you. I think we can give you a better deal than your initial request. Five minutes of wisdom from your father?" The snake watched me nod. "Why would you want that? In your twenty-eight years of life you two never shared a heart-to-heart talk. His only pertinent comment to you about women was 'You? You can catch 'em but you can't keep 'em.'"

"Damned right." I giggled. I'd just said *damned* to Satan. I was drunk enough to find that funny.

Satan hissed and a waitress appeared. She had fangs and horns, and I wouldn't have hit on her. She traded my Manhattan for black coffee. The first sip sobered me, to my amazement. "Never underestimate the power of coffee," the Devil said as I gaped at him. "I can't negotiate a contract while you're drunk. It would astonish you to know how many people wiggle out of a contract with a diminished-capacity argument."

"That works?" I asked.

Satan nodded. "Many stratagems work. God is the judge and he's hostile to my arguments. But now you're sober. Here's the deal. In exchange for your soul I bring you to happiness, barring the angst of knowing that eternal damnation awaits you. Do we have a deal?"

I had some more coffee. "We do. When does it start?"

"At the reading of the will." The serpent slithered toward the edge of the table, then paused. "I think, Mr. Larabie, that helping you can help *me* with my father."

* * * *

The reading of Dad's will was just a formality. I was the only beneficiary present. I sat in Mr. Jameson's office and listened to the details of who got what: scholarships for Dad's children by his later marriages. Annuities to ladies who must have been mistresses. The hunting cabin and Cessna and race horses went to some friends. Mr. Jameson got the *Treasure*, Dad's deep-sea fishing boat, his home-away-from-home which I'd only boarded once in my life. I got a house, which caught me off-guard. "House?" I asked.

Mr. Jameson looked at me as though I were daft. "Your father's

> "If I can live in the world my father created, you can live in your father's old love-nest."

first house. It had sentimental value." He handed me some papers and described my brand-new old house. It was in the Staunton district, which I knew from handling a real-estate agent's accounts. When the papers said *waterfront property with a rural ambiance*, it meant a drainage pond and cow pastures.

I almost didn't sign the papers. "Dad was sentimental over *this*?" I demanded. "Why?"

"He never told me."

"Why not? You were his best friend. You and Dad would go out alone on the *Treasure* every few months and—"

"Our friendship involved a mutual respect for privacy," Mr. Jameson said. "He had a reluctance to discuss certain issues." *Like you, loser*, his attitude said. "If you dislike the house, you can sell it."

I signed, and left the office. When I got to the parking lot I saw a snake coiled on the hood of my Subaru. "Lovely day," Satan said. "Have you looked at the sky? The supernova is bright enough to see at noon. The astronomers are agog."

I looked. I saw a glint in the blue sky. "Does it mean anything?" I asked. "Like the end of the world? Betelgeuse is only five hundred light-years from Earth...there's radiation..."

"The radiation will miss Earth, which has a few years left in it." Satan looked me over. "Let me be your chauffeur."

He drove. He drove quite well, considering that he had to coil himself around the seatbelt for leverage, while his mouth gripped the steering wheel and his tail worked the brake and gas pedals. "I inherited a house in Staunton," I said. "*Staunton!* It would be the crime capital of the state, if they didn't keep mugging the poll-takers. The lawyer said Dad kept it for sentimental reasons. Only—"

"—only you never heard of it," Satan said around a mouthful of steering wheel. "There's reason for that. And your father *did* own it once. He sold it a year before your birth. Despite that, he maintained deep sentiments over it. Why don't you examine the papers and raise objections?"

"'Objections'?" I leafed through the papers and found baffling numbers. "The property taxes—"

"—are low even for a near-derelict neighborhood," Satan said. "That took a bit of doing, as well as changing the records to prove that your father still owned this house and had placed it in his will. But all the paperwork will withstand scrutiny. I am, in a strictly technical sense, good."

I reread the papers. He wasn't kidding. I would want to keep my apartment in the city, but if I felt like it I could afford to keep this house. Not much chance of that, I thought as we drove into Staunton. The neighborhood had been in decay since the local canneries went out of business in the early eighties. We came to one street where the only residents were a biker gang in a corner house, and we parked at the curb of a boarded-up dump. "Your father had just graduated from college when he bought this house," Satan said. "The drive to his job was long, but the site had its compensations."

We left the car and went around the house, while the bikers down the street watched us in curiosity. The houses on either side of the clapboard building had burned down years ago, leaving weed-choked lots. The back yard was hummocky and extended to the drainage pond. The back door was off its hinges, and we entered there. "Your father sold it at a loss," he said.

"Obviously." The last owner, who might have been Dad, had left behind sheet-covered furniture. An old photo album rested on a shelf. "The photos will interest you," Satan said. He coiled by the fireplace while I leafed through the album. It was laid out like a story: boy meets girl, girl gets pregnant, boy marries girl, world greets new baby.

"That marriage ended in a no-fault divorce," Satan said as I gaped at the last page. "Irreconcilable differences, as they say, coupled with pressure from the bride's family."

I spoke in shock. "That's my father!"

"Correct," Satan said. "Your father never mentioned his first marriage to you."

The real surprise was that I felt surprised. I mean, Dad must have had some kind of life before he met Mom. Look at the numbers like a good accountant and you find a couple of years between Dad's graduation and his first date with Mom. And, like a good accountant, I thought about everything in the ledgers. "Did Dad keep track of—of—"

"Of his first son?" Satan shook his head. "No. His ex-wife remarried and never informed your half-brother of his true ancestry. Your father never saw him again, save in his imagination, where he remained the perfect child."

Great. "And I could never measure up to that."

"I have the same problem," Satan said. "Every so often *my* father becomes creative. He'll think

for an eternity, then bring a new order of beings into existence. Before humanity he created the angels, and before us it was the djinn, and the eudaemons, and the ouphes, and among many others, the nephilim." Satan's tail rattled angrily at the last name. "To listen to *him*, you'd have thought the nephilim were perfect. Not even the angels could measure up to them, and because the nephilim long ago passed from existence, I have no chance to outperform them. But enough about my family. This house needs work, but you can afford it. I want you to move in as quickly as possible."

"Live *here*?" I nearly threw that damned album across the room. "Live *here*?"

Satan smiled. "If I can live in the world my father created, you can live in your father's old love-nest."

"I won't—"

"You will, Mr. Larabie, if you want to be happy. While you're at it, put an apple tree in the back yard."

"An apple tree?"

"Yes. I'm feeling nostalgic."

* * * *

I ordered an apple tree and I got a mouse. A five-foot-ten mouse with shaggy blonde hair and muscles like a dockworker. She drove an ancient pick-up truck with a small tree and garden supplies in its flatbed, and she was so quiet I had to ask her name three times. Cheryl. Cheryl Sharpless, from Sharpless Landscaping. She set to work at once, digging a hole in the back yard. I would have helped, but I had to fix some broken windows before nightfall, when the forecast predicted rain. After that I hoped to get some sleep. My new home added an extra hour to my daily commute to work, and I wasn't having a splendid time at Rutledge & Rutledge. Word had got out that I now lived in Staunton, and my coworkers felt a lot less co- about working with me.

Cheryl finished her task before I finished mine. I took a break so she could give me a run-down on the care and feeding of newly transplanted apple trees. She spoke with an attitude that said *I bet you know more about this than I do.* I found that I had questions about what was, when you got down to it, an oversized weed that would attract rats and squirrels. Cheryl, who was sweaty and dirty from her work, gave me advice on how to deal with rodents, then asked to use the bathroom.

I led her inside. The house had two bathrooms, one useless and one adequate, if you weren't fussy. I made sure she got the right one before I returned to the back yard. As I stepped out the door (which needed paint and weather stripping) I saw a snake wind its way up the trunk.

I walked up to the tree. "Satan?"

"In the poikilothermic flesh, Mr. Larabie." The snake rubbed its head against a branch like a cat which had just found the perfect ankle. "Ahhh...this takes me back. Eden, the apple, and all that."

"Eden was a myth," I told the Devil. "The universe was created—"

"—in the Big Bang," Satan said, "and after the planets formed from interstellar gas, life arose through evolution. My father left those details out of Genesis. He skipped to the part he liked best, where he gave souls to the first humans. And cursed me to be a snake." Satan flicked his forked tongue at me. "The irony is that I've come to enjoy this form. It's a delight to hunt down and swallow a live rat, then sun myself on a flat rock. When you discuss landscaping with the lady, include a stone which is a cubit square and catches the winter sun."

"Now *wait* a minute," I said hotly. "You've been pushing me around—"

"Indeed." His tongue flicked again. "I've pushed you down the path to happiness. Thanks to me you no longer live in that drama-queen palace of an apartment building."

"I *knew* you were behind that!" I'd moved out because half the tenants had started screaming at one another and the other half had turned into party animals. The only breaks came when the police showed up. "Thanks to you I'm living in a rat hole and sleeping on a futon and eating pot-noodles with water I boil on a hot plate—"

"—and you're in no danger of going to prison next year," Satan said, "which had been fated for you. The man in apartment 2-E would have drawn you into a foolish scheme to swindle retirees."

"I would never swindle anyone!"

"No more than you would sell your soul?"

He had me there, literally. "So why didn't you buy *his* soul?" I demanded. "He sounds like your type."

"I'll have his soul in due time... due in about two years, thanks to his drinking. And of what use is he to me, really? He could never get me what I want, which at present is a large piece of flagstone."

He slithered down from the tree and vanished into the weeds. A moment later Cheryl stepped out of the house. "You're going to fix it

Locusts flung themselves like hailstones against the windows.

up all by yourself?" she asked. She sounded a bit awed, as though I'd already turned the pesthole into a mansion.

"It's a labor of love," I said. Just to spite the Devil, I would *not* ask her about landscaping. "I tried to hire some people, but you say *Staunton* and they suddenly remember a prior engagement at the Old Lepers' Home."

"Yeah, some folks think there's too much crime here," she said. "If you need help, my cousin Phil's a good handyman, and it would impress his parole officer if he could find regular work."

Oi. "I'll think about it," I lied.

* * * *

Okay, I did think about it. I thought about it on Sunday when a swarm of flies hindered my effort to move furniture from my apartment to the house. I thought about it on Monday when blood poured from the faucet in my bathroom. Tuesday was fine until the local bikers started an all-night rally that sounded like the wrath of God. Before dawn on Wednesday, a beam of light from the supernova twisted to write *Cheryl* on the sky. On Thursday morning, opening my car door unleashed a plague of locusts.

I scrambled back into my house and made a phone call. "*Sharpless Landscaping,*" a man answered.

"This is Fred Larabie. I want to ask Cheryl about a landscaping job."

"*Then you want me. My daughter's a good worker when she tries, but she's got no business smarts.*"

"Well, my place needs a landscape transplant." Locusts flung themselves like hailstones against the windows. "And I want her for the job." The locusts eased up. "She also mentioned her cousin Phil. Tell her I'd like to hire him." The locusts vanished.

"*Cheryl's a bad judge of character. Her cousin will rob you blind.*"

Some family, I thought. "I can get a good deal on a seeing-eye dog," I said, and hung up.

* * * *

I hired Cousin Phil and he got the work done, bit by bit: rip out the old carpet one day, fix the bathroom plumbing another day, patch the roof after that. By the time Cheryl's father showed up to make an estimate on the landscaping, the house had begun to look habitable. "Still needs work," Mr. Sharpless groused as we walked into the back yard. "And it's wasted in this area. You know much about the local property values?"

"They've got nowhere to go but up," I said.

"They've got nowhere to go, period," the old man said. "Too many deserted houses here. No one will ever salvage them. You're wasting your money."

"As long as it's my money, why would you care?"

"I care because doing what you want is pricey, and I doubt you can pay in a lump sum. That means monthly payments, and if you can't keep up, I get stiffed."

"Then I'll pay as I go," I said. "Let's start with the back. I want a lawn with yard-square flagstones at the corners."

"That—" He stopped and gaped. "What's *that*?"

"It's the apple tree Cheryl planted."

"I know it's a tree! Is that a *snake*?"

"He eats rats and squirrels. I want the flagstones there and there." I pointed.

Mr. Sharpless blanched as Satan slithered down from the tree and vanished into the weeds. Then he worked up his nerve and offered me a price and completion date. We'd just shaken hands on it when I heard screams and gunshots from down the street. Satan had expanded into something the size of a telephone pole, and he lunged at the bikers until the survivors hopped on their bikes and roared off.

> You cannot make yourself happy by questioning his ghost.

Mr. Sharpless hastened to his car. I walked to the tree and waited for Satan. When he returned he had shrunk back to his usual six foot length, and he licked his lips as he coiled up the tree trunk. "*Two* flagstones?" he said. "I appreciate the generosity. And to be honest, it's high time I drove the criminal element from our bit of Eden."

"You...*ate*...one of them?"

"I worked up quite an appetite in helping you. And—"

I heard a loud bang from the bikers' abandoned house. As I watched flames licked from its windows and door.

"A meth lab," Satan said. "They're quite explosive, you know. That's not what I want in this neighborhood."

"What *you* want?"

That reptilian head bobbed in a nod. "I have plans, Mr. Larabie. Now call Cheryl, thank her for recommending her cousin, and discuss your landscaping needs."

* * * *

My mood darkened as the house took shape. Dad had lived here with his starter family. I could imagine him in each newly renovated

room: changing the baby's diapers in the nursery, making love in the master bedroom, lounging in front of a TV in the front room, waxing a car in the garage. I put in more trees, more shrubs, more flowers, as if to lose the house in a jungle. That meant I saw a lot of Cheryl, who liked to work weekends, but it didn't help my imagination.

"It will always rankle," Satan told me one evening. We were in the front room, watching the evening news. "You'll never know how often your father compared you to his first son, or where he thought you fell short."

"That isn't it," I said, just to be contrary. "I want to know *why* he never told me. Maybe he had a good reason. Maybe he felt ashamed of himself for judging me—"

"No. I watched him."

"You did? Why?"

"I watch everyone, and I'm a good judge of character. Much like your coworkers, who see you as dull and hostile, yet eager to display your knowledge of obscure regulations and loopholes." He paused as the TV showed an astronomer at Palomar, where the venerable two-hundred-inch telescope had found DNA in the supernova's expanding shell. "Yet they only see the obvious. Let's consider you and Cheryl. You've added this extra gardening so you can enjoy more of her presence. I *have* noticed how you watch the female body builders on TV, not to mention the way you ogle her—"

"Don't change the subject."

"Did I? The subject is your happiness." Satan let out a hissing sigh. "Very well, let's discuss your father. You cannot make yourself happy by questioning his ghost. As surely as my father made little green apples, you would not know what questions to pose. You want to be happy? Invite Cheryl out to dinner. Next Friday will be perfect."

* * * *

Cheryl and her parents lived in an old farmhouse on a corner of a five-acre field. Sharpless Landscaping was a crowded operation, with greenhouses, equipment sheds, ranks of saplings that awaited sale, endless piles of raw materials. I could see that they kept the place neat and efficient, that nothing sat around long or went to waste. Business looked good.

Cheryl's father answered my knock at the door. He gave me a hostile look I hadn't seen since high school, then called his daughter and closed the door. I could hear muffled words: *home on time... behave yourself...don't take advantage of him.* What brought *that* on? Cheryl was only a couple years younger than me, yet her father talked to her like she was a child.

She came out and we got in my car. She looked diffident as we drove away. "How was work?" she asked.

"Lots of numbers," I said.

"What are the people like?"

"A lot like sharks, except they don't smile as much." I cringed. Leave it to me to start a date by whining. "It's competitive, but I manage to keep up."

And I was like that all night, on the trip to the restaurant, during dinner, on the way back to her house. I'd catch myself grumbling or griping, then try to back away from it. About all I did right was to get Cheryl to talk about gardening. Her face would light up and I'd forget how foolish I could sound. I was sorry to take her home. When I walked her to the door her father turned on the lights and glared at me until I went away.

Lights burned in my place when I got home. Satan waited in the front room while the TV showed me entering the room. "I'd call that a successful evening," he said.

"You watched?"

"You were on channel one." A demon stepped out of the TV and handed me a mug of coffee, then climbed back through the screen. "I had to make certain she had a good time. You acquitted yourself nobly, and as I planned she has fallen in love with you—"

I threw my coffee against the wall, undoing some of Cousin Phil's repair work. I glared at Satan, who smirked. "You don't want her?" he asked.

"You—you set her up—how could you *do* that to her?"

"Just a touch of that old black magic," Satan said. "Her parents are domineering, her mirror is unkind and her future bleak. She could fall for any attentive man—"

"So why *me*?" I shouted. "I faked my way through the whole night! You couldn't find someone better?"

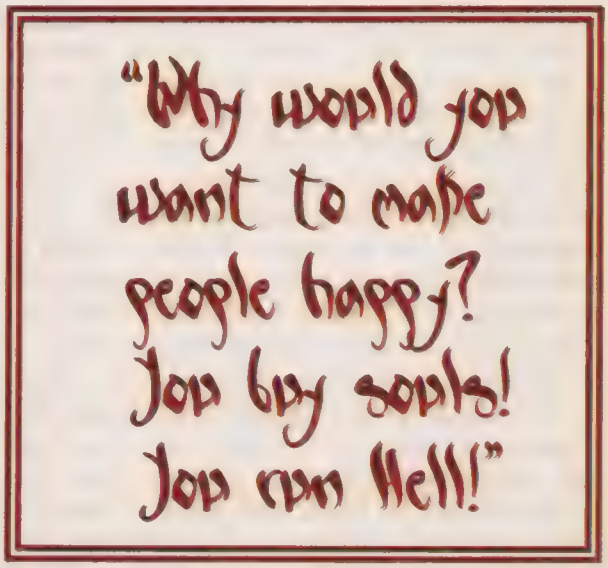
"Is something wrong with you?"

"*You* have to ask? You should have taken my soul for a test-drive when you bought it! What if—"

"What if your father was a good judge of character," he said implacably, "and your shortcomings have nothing to do with his preoccupation with his first son, or with his distant nature, but are your responsibility?"

I nodded dumbly.

"*Such* eloquence," the Devil said. "But it's preferable to your whining." He slithered out the front door before I could ask what he wanted with Cheryl.



* * * *

I still had my accounting job, and with it my reputation as a detail maven. I maintained that reputation by spending my coffee breaks and lunch periods in my cubicle and going on-line, where I had flagged every legislative and judicial website imaginable. I always knew when some congressman in Washington pushed through a lower tax rate for investors, where to make charitable contributions for the best write-offs and—today—when the state legislature approved a measure to allow for the purchase of abandoned real estate by local homeowners, at a cost of one dollar per acre, for the purpose of stimulating private development and reflating depressed property values.

My phone rang. "Larabie."

"*Intriguing, isn't it?*" Satan asked.

"It looks like a bit of special-interest work," I said.

"*I'm often accused of sponsoring such legislation. This is a rare instance where the accusation is justified. Take advantage of it, Mr. Larabie, and on the way home pick up some spare ribs and charcoal.*" He hung up.

You don't buy land the way you buy spare ribs. You go through a licensed real-estate agent, who expects money for services rendered. I figured that I'd spend closer to a hundred dollars per acre, which would have been a bargain in an area where you could develop the land. That was obstacle number two: What would I do with weeds and empty houses? Section 201(d) of the Suburban Revitalization Act required a plan in regard to the means by which the land would be developed to enhance residential values or assist a home-based family business. I didn't have a plan.

My screensaver changed from Classic Pac-Man to a vivid image of ancient Egyptians dealing with a plague of boils. That motivated me to do title searches for my neighborhood, so I'd have something to discuss with an agent. At the end of my workday a new screensaver blanked my spreadsheet: happy pagans dancing around a burnt offering. The offering looked like spare ribs.

"You act like you've seen signs in the heavens!"

I took the threat and did some shopping on the way home. I added a cookbook to Satan's shopping list, as well as barbecue sauce and coleslaw, on the theory that Satan expected me to invite Cheryl to dinner. I tried to call her, but she didn't answer her cell phone.

When I got home her truck blocked my driveway. Its bed was heaped with rubble, including—no surprise—an old but serviceable barbecue. Cheryl was out back, hacking some freshly sprouted weeds with a hoe. I surprised myself by saying something not overly dumb: "Go easy on them. They're only babies."

She stopped and looked embarrassed. "Oh..."

"Something's wrong."

"It's silly."

"Silly is when I buy ribs and charcoal, and I don't have a barbecue. Top *that*."

"I made Dad angry," she said. She leaned on the hoe while I coaxed it out of her. That morning the old man had chewed her out for a string of mistakes, and sworn that her blunders would drive away customers and put the family out of business, "and this time I finally had it, you know?" She concluded, "So after he told me to take the junk to the dump, I came here instead."

"I'm glad you did," I said. I'd ended up with my arm around her shoulder. "You're probably ready for dinner. Is that barbecue in your truck any good?"

Cheryl nodded. She helped me wrestle the salvaged barbecue into my back yard, after which I sent her inside to clean up. I felt apprehensive as I got the barbecue ready. In a few hours, tops, I'd have her in bed, and why had Satan gone to all this trouble to set us up?

"Does it matter?" Satan said. The serpent coiled around my ankle. "You lust for her. You won't turn her away tonight, because that would hurt her—"

"And you won't?" I demanded. "What's the deal? I've got all the social skills of a hermit crab, and Cheryl's got no idea how to defend herself—"

"She now has you to defend her," Satan said.

"Come *off* it!" I said. "Why would you want to make people happy? You buy souls! You run Hell! You—"

"Enough." Satan coiled on the grass and glared at me like he was ready to strike. "Can you name each of the fifty plagues which God visited on the Pharaoh?"

"The Bible only mentions ten plagues."

"The Bible only hit the high points. God believes in overkill. It's a family trait, and unless you want to experience it firsthand"—his tail rattled for emphasis—"you will buy all the land you can afford. Cheryl will build upon it a gardening business, even as her father did with his land, and you will be damned quick to help her. I want you to sell her on the idea by tomorrow morning."

"What's the rush?" I asked. "You act like you've seen signs in the heavens!"

He silenced me with another rattle of his tail. "Don't concern yourself with signs, Mr. Larabie, unless they involve real estate." And he slithered away.

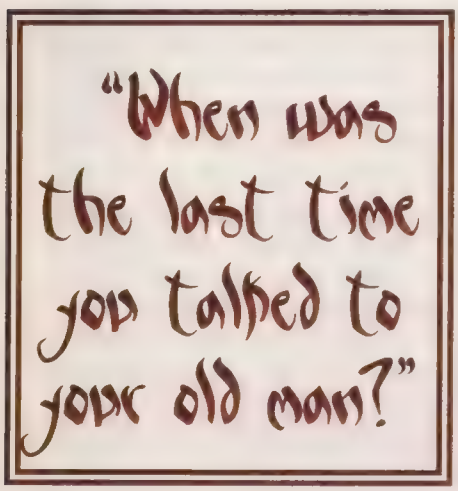
* * * *

In the end I met Satan's deadline. Losing her virginity enthused Cheryl and put her in a mood to see me as a genius. She loved my plans. Bulldoze some houses, build greenhouses on the old foundations, grow sod and shrubs for transplant, and so on. At least it didn't take much effort to get her attention back in bed.

Satan had developed his managerial skills during the Bronze Age: he wanted that pyramid built *now*, and he didn't care how big a whip it took. He nudged assorted bureaucrats to speed things along. I drew up a plan, complete with an environmental impact report and projected financial effects, and within a day I became the awkward owner of ten acres of abandoned suburbia. I filed for rezoning and got construction permits right away. When my time and money became a problem, my employers downsized the company and offered me a decent severance package. That kept us going until the bank approved a loan on terms that the loan officer called downright sinful.

On the seventh day Satan let me rest. I slept until Cheryl woke me by lugging some cartons into the bedroom. I rubbed sleep from my eyes and saw that she looked unhappy. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I went to my folks' place," she said, "and got my things. Dad made a scene."




Oh, jeez. I got her to sit on the bed with me and tell me about it. Her father had demanded to know where she'd been for the past week, her mother had been worried sick, why hadn't she called, and so on and so forth. No mention of the way he hadn't returned the messages she left on his answering machine. "You should have brought me along," I said.

"What, and put you through that, too?"

"I'll have to face your dad sometime," I said. "I may as well get it over with."

"Over? It's never over with him. But I stood up to him this time. He said you'd brainwashed me, and I said that was the first time he'd ever said I had a brain, and he just gaped while I walked out." She sighed. "Now I have to go to the parks department. They're auctioning off some equipment and I can get us some bargains."

"Are you up to it?"

"I have to be. What's the alternative? Let this business fail before it starts? I'd never hear the end of it from my father." She got up, paused, then went to the window. "Where's your snake?"

"My what?" I joined her at the window. "Maybe he climbed higher up the tree—what?" Cheryl had spoken in a very small voice.

"I said, is he really Satan?"

"What makes you think that?"

"He said so. I was looking at the tree and he said, don't touch the apples, it's still forbidden. Then we started talking and he told me his name."

I had to tell her sometime. "He's Satan...and we have a deal. My soul in exchange for happiness."

"That's what he told me," Cheryl said. "It's funny but he isn't as nasty as people say. Did he tell you what happened in Eden? With Adam and Eve?"

"No. I suppose he was out of town when they ate the apple?"

"No, he was there and he said the whole thing was his fault. He tried to talk them out of eating the forbidden fruit because he wanted to show his father that he could enforce His laws, but he accidentally overdid it and made it sound too good to resist. His father accused him of using reverse psychology and he thinks that could be true, because deep down he's jealous of the human race. We're his rivals for God's affection."

"Do you believe him?" I asked.

"Yes, but I don't trust him. Will you be all right? I have to leave for that auction now."

I assured her I'd survive. After she left I showered, shaved, and dressed. I felt more impressed than ever by her. She'd known about Satan and I'd never caught on.

As I left the bathroom I heard bangs and groans. I followed the sounds and discovered Satan slithering around my kitchen. "Where have you been?" I asked the serpent.

"Going to and fro, and walking up and down upon the earth, which is quite a trick in this form. I can, however, say that I averted your impending in-law problem." He made a gagging noise. "Antacid. You must have some."

"Cheryl's parents—did you *eat* them?"

"Along with her cousin Phil. They were most disagreeable, in every sense of the word." I found a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and poured it in his mouth. He swallowed and belched. "Divine intervention. It must be. No lesser force would allow an utter innocent such as Cheryl to issue from that misbegotten union."

"Why are you interested in her?" I asked, hoping to catch him off-guard. "What is she to you?"

"A pity I can't invoke the curse of the first-born son on you," Satan hissed. "Have you ever read the Bible?"

"Of course."

"I mean front-to-back, like that book you hid under your mattress when you were fifteen, *Sex Slaves*

*of the—"*

"I read the Bible," I said hastily.

"Good." Satan coiled on the kitchen floor and regarded me with his tiny black eyes. "What is your literary opinion of the Bible? Not its prose style, or its characterizations, but its basic narrative structure?"

He sounded like my high school English teacher, which may not have been a coincidence. "As best-sellers go it's choppy and could use some comic relief, especially because the last chapter is so downbeat..."

Satan nodded as I gaped. "The Apocalypse is by its very nature downbeat and lacking in comic relief. It will require an Antichrist who will corrupt humanity, persecute the devout, and lead the damned into battle at Armageddon. That role is destined to go to your son. Hence my interest in you and Cheryl, and in raising your son in an isolated neighborhood, away from uncorrupting influences."

"I don't have a son!"

"Mr. Larabie, you and Cheryl have spent seven energetic and unprotected days together. Rest assured, and you *should* rest from it, you will have a son."

And my boy was damned to be the worst villain in human history. It appalled me. "Everything you've done—*why*?"

"To please my father," Satan said. "To please him I have obeyed his every command, even though obeying him creates pain in my still-angelic nature. I have filled Hell with undeserved and outrageous tortures. I have given good men evil counsel, corrupted virtuous women, and generated calamities to test the faith of the pious. *Your* only complaint is that your son will be an overachiever. Count your blessings, Mr. Larabie." He slithered away.

* * * *

Our plans moved into the construction stage, and I found a contractor to demolish old houses and build greenhouses. Cheryl hired some local men to strip out the weeds and old lawns, rototill the ground and plant seeds and saplings in the newly fertilized soil. A local TV station sent a camera crew to report on how we had brought jobs to Staunton. "An excellent first step," Satan called it late one evening, as he coiled on one of his flagstones. "You've gained a reputation as a businessman and humanitarian. In time that will aid your son's rise to power."

I was nearby, burning steaks on the huge brick-and-mortar barbecue Satan had ordered us to install. I thought about tossing him on the fire, but he probably would have basked in the flames. "You know I'm not happy about that."

"Oh, my, what a surprise," Satan said. "I have failed to make you happy, our contract is null and void, I have lost your soul, curses, foiled again! I never wanted your pathetic soul. It is your son I want and it is your son I shall have, with or without you."

He flicked his tongue at my frustration. My son hadn't even been born and I'd already let him down. I'd once asked Satan for five minutes with Dad; the Devil would probably give me those minutes, free, just to spite me.

Well, I could spite him, too. "When was the last time you talked to your old man?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I told you, I read the Bible." I turned the steaks on the grille. "The book of the Apocalypse doesn't mention the Antichrist. It's got beasts with seven heads and the great whore of Babylon, but no Antichrist. But *you* get killed by an angel."

"Do I?" The snake chuckled. "When St. John wrote the last book of the New Testament, he was an old and inattentive man with no understanding of the concept of dramatic unity. My father did some rewriting to produce a stronger conflict, with good and evil personified as the Christ and Antichrist. He assures me—"

"I can make him appreciate me."

"So you *do* talk to him."

"To be precise, *he* does all the talking. A sign in the heavens shall foretell the coming of the Antichrist. He told me this soon after Gutenberg printed his comically outdated version of the Bible."

"That means you two haven't talked in five centuries."

"We're not close, Mr. Larabie."

"So how do you know my son is to be the Antichrist?" I persisted. "Did God send you a brimstone Candygram? An autographed copy of the Next Testament? Or—"

"I told you there was a sign in the sky!" Satan said, and the ground rumbled menacingly under my feet.

"What sign? The supernova? You call that a *sign*? It's a cosmic accident that happened five hundred years ago! It's a coincidence that the light reached Earth now! A real sign ought to have flights of angels, huge rainbows, a pillar of fire by night and a column of smoke by day—"

A pillar of fire erupted from the barbecue, turning the steaks into a column of smoke. That might have silenced me if Cheryl hadn't peeked out the back door. I didn't feel brave; I felt protective. "How do you know your old man hasn't changed his plans again?" I said. "The televangelists made up a thing called the Rapture. What if he wrote that into the script?"

Satan glared at me a moment. "Don't run away," he grated, and slithered away.

Cheryl crept out of the house. "He'll be back," I said.

"Tuesday night, when the moon is full," she said. When I raised an eyebrow she explained, "He invited some people for a ceremony."

"He did?" I looked at the barbecue, and I had the passing thought that it was big enough to be a sacrificial altar. "Did he say who?"

"No." The look she gave the barbecue didn't reassure me. "He just said he wanted them to meet me... after the ceremony."

The good news, I supposed, was that I wouldn't have to spend the evening making small talk with Satan's friends. With luck I might give them heartburn, and as a bonus we were out of Pepto-Bismol. Beyond that I didn't see anything but something that looked like a lot of red ink.

* * * *

Satan hadn't returned by Tuesday afternoon, when a catering service showed up to prepare a feast. Its white-clad workers posted tiki torches around our back yard, and brought in Roman-style couches which they faced toward the barbecue. They loaded buffet tables with appetizers and hors d'oeuvres and desserts and bowls of spiked punch, but nothing that looked like an entrée.

The guests arrived at sundown. The men and women dressed in styles that ranged from button-down to skank-ho, but the one who got my attention wore black robes and had an ornate knife tucked in his sash. The blade looked suitable for sacrificing virgins, but from the way he gazed at me I didn't think he would check any credentials. The other guests surrounded Cheryl in a worshipful circle, and they wouldn't let me near her.

The crowd grew as the full moon rose. I kept making lame, desperate plans to defeat Satan and his minions: quick, call the caterer and order angel food cake. Have the deviled eggs repossessed. Put my TV on the back porch and pop *The Exorcist* into its DVD slot.

Twilight ended. An expectant hush fell over the crowd, and in that hush I heard a mighty slurp. It persisted and I followed it, pressing through the crowd until I came to a buffet table. Satan had crawled onto the table and dunked his head into a punch bowl. When the snake raised his head he peered blurrily at me. "I found my father," he said.

"And?"

"Betelgeuse!" Satan said, while his guests gathered around. "My father ran off to Betelgeuse!"

"The sign in the heavens!" the man in the black robes said. He drew his sacrificial knife. "Satan has driven God into the depths of—"

Satan swelled hugely and swallowed the man with one snap of his now-titanic jaws. The serpent charged around the yard, knocking over tiki torches and couches. His guests ran and screamed while he devoured them along with much of the landscaping. I dodged him and ran to Cheryl.

Satan slithered over to us as I held her amid the wreckage. His size and anger made his presence overwhelming. "W-why Betelgeuse?" I trembled as I spoke. "It blew up hundreds of years ago—"

"He blew it up in a new act of creation!" Satan said. The apple tree dangled from his mouth like a parsley sprig; he swallowed it. "He used the explosion to spark a new form of life in the star's cometary cloud!"

"That's marvelous!" Cheryl said. "So what's wrong?"

"Everything!" Satan said. "He's so enthralled with his new world that he forgot about this one. Salvation, the Apocalypse, everything! He changed his mind five centuries ago, and *he never told me*!"

"Take it easy," Cheryl said comfortingly. She stepped forward and stroked his scaly head. "So God cancelled the Apocalypse. It's not the end of the world, you know."

"It is for me!" Satan said. "He obliterated Hell and every demon in it because he no longer needed them—and he didn't even try to kill *me*! What sort of father does that?"

"He abandoned us, too," Cheryl said. "But I know how you can get even."

Satan blinked at her. "How?"

"Show him up," she said. "Stay here and do a better job of godding than he did."

"Stay *here*?"

"Why not?" Cheryl said. "You put together a boy, a girl, and an apple tree. It looks like deep down you want to re-create Eden."

Satan hissed and began to shrink. "No! Never!"

"Okay, what else could you do?" Cheryl asked as he reduced to his usual size and coiled on the lawn. "Mope around? If your father doesn't appreciate you—"

"I can *make* him appreciate me," Satan said, shrinking to the size of a worm. "I'll go to Betelgeuse and..."

He vanished and Cheryl let out her breath. "I thought he'd never leave."

"Reverse psychology?" I asked.

She nodded. "Unlike some people, he couldn't outgrow that need to impress his father."

"Yeah." I looked at a ragged hole in the lawn. "He even took our apple tree. I wonder what made protecting those apples so important. Was he still trying to impress God, or did the apples have some magic power?"

"I wondered about that, too." Like a stage magician Cheryl flourished an apple stolen from the tree. She smiled at me. "Bite?"

She didn't have to tempt me twice.

There's not much to say about **W. R. Thompson**. He has been writing and selling stories, sporadically, for almost thirty years. Most of them were published in *Analog*. He has a couple *Star Trek* novels still in print as well.

# Leap of Faith

by Alan Smale

If at first you don't succeed, try a pillar of fire, one of salt, and a nice fresh start.

Illustration by Kristina Carroll

Levi traipsed into the city of Shadom footsore and blistered, crusted with the salt of his own sweat. A deep scratch along his right thigh from groin to knee was his only serious wound, yet it ached and stung like the very Devil, and his shoulders ached from leaning part of his weight on his wooden staff. Having survived the Vasty Deeps by the skin of his teeth, Levi badly needed to rest and heal. His youthful God had other ideas.

Time and space stabilized once he passed through the giant arched gates. No longer did the city look blue to him; no longer did the mountains appear reddened when he glanced back. Everything was now a washed-out desert tan, and Levi in his exhaustion felt the same color.

His face was warm but the back of his neck felt chilled. Ignoring the sneers of the gate-guards, who doubtless took him for one of the crazy desert prophets, Levi knelt and kissed the dirt, giving thanks to God for his successful return.

As he did so the full stream of his earthly Shadom memories returned, hitting him between the eyes like a boulder. He stood and nodded. He now knew his way home.

A woman beating the dust out of a rug looked up as Levi passed, and gestured to avert the Evil Eye. Levi did, after all, look as if he had been excreted from the bowels of Hell.

He glanced left and right into other people's homes as he walked by. Here lived the ordinary folk, men and women who ate and worked, farmed and traded, cared for one another and raised children. Their real lives had continued and progressed in Levi's absence, and he obscurely envied them their normality. How different would the world be, once it was fully formed? Once God's Creation was finished, could Levi return permanently to a life here in Shadom? And what would that be like?

Or would there always be more to do, out in the bright and the dark?

Entering the city square, Levi passed by the Tower of Clockwork. Even as the spirals and murals on the tower walls dazzled him, he noted the clock still held its time adequately against the more accurate giant sundial in the center of the square. In the mountains, and above the Earth, Levi's days had moved at a variable pace, stretching interminably or ending without warning, the land rocking under his feet. Bushes would burn. Snakes would occasionally clear their throats and speak, to offer him wealth incalculable. Such distractions he had ignored, knowing them to be only echoes of the true salvation that was to be found through God.

And in the Deeps, of course, he hadn't been able to see the sun at all.

He looked up in time to see Lilith swoop down out of the air, serpentine and majestic, all black hair and snarl.

The back of his neck tingled. A shout of warning pierced his reverie. He looked up in time to see Lilith swoop down out of the air, serpentine and majestic, all black hair and snarl. She plunged into the streets, jaws wide. But the city was ready for her, as always. On the housetops and tower, bowmen stepped out of cover: uniformed Justicemen, city guards, even some of the Crass-men in their rags, all briefly united in a single goal. Lilith roared by Levi at speed—with a literal roar—not thirty feet above him, as the bows bent and the arrows flew.

Riddled with arrows, the demon plummeted to the sand and exploded into smoke and fleshy wreckage that quickly burned and evaporated, leaving naught behind. A half-hearted cheering broke out, quickly silenced. It was too hot to get excited. Especially since tomorrow Lilith would reappear in the skies and attack Shadom once more, and again the day after, until they could figure out a better way of dealing with her.

Sometimes Lilith did get past their defenses. Sometimes she smashed buildings, even killed and maimed.

Next to the Tower of Clockwork was a wellhead. Levi unbuckled his cloak, stripped to the waist, and pumped the handle, allowing the water to sluice the desert grime from him. He soon stood in a growing puddle of his own filth, yet the water rejuvenated him as if it had flowed directly into his blood. From the other side of the square a jezebel watched him, a water jug on her head and her hand on her hip, tongue darting along her lips, no doubt wondering whether he had any money.

Levi carried none, and was God's man and a family man besides.

He brushed the drops from his skin and was preparing to go home when the angels walked into the city square.

They were so similar to each other that they might have been the same being, duplicated. Almost impossibly beautiful, their features were as delicate as glazed pots. Their skin was a blueish-white where Levi's was olive, their chins smooth and unblemished. Levi's wife Rebekah was swarthier than these creatures. Levi had never actually seen an angel before, as far as he recalled, but their provenance was clear. The jezebel gaped at them, fear and lust warring on her features.

The angels headed straight for Levi. "Sanctuary," said the leftmost, and "Hospitality," the one on the right.

Levi sighed. This could mean nothing but trouble.

And yet, a degree of caution was in order. The snakes that tried to tempt him in the mountains had fine glossy skins, too. "You know me?" he said cautiously.

"You are Levi." "A good man." "Wise and conscientious." "Servant of the Lord." "His mark is upon you." "More of a glow, really."

As if they were a single being with two bodies and two mouths. Levi studied them with professional interest. "We've met before?"

"No." "But we have always known you."

He shook his head, bemused. "Who are you?"

"Visitors." "From another place."

"Another...?"

"We must be circumspect," said one, apologetically.

Indeed, the angels had already drawn an unhealthy degree of attention. Like moths to a flame, Crass-men were ambling into the square. Interest was growing. The jezebel was touching herself coarsely, unable to resist; beneath the odd blue shifts the angels wore, their forms were just too perfect.

And where there was no lust, there was fear. A small boy ran up and pitched a well-aimed stone. The left-most angel watched its arc through the air with detached interest, and then said "Ow," as it bounced off his shoulder.

Like it or not, the angels were under Levi's protection.

"Come with me," he said.

* * * *

His little Leah threw herself on him with a squeal, wrapping her arms around his thighs. He lifted his daughter and tossed her lightly in the air, laughing.

Rebekah, his wife, stopped her bread-making long enough to say darkly, "So, deigning to pay us a visit? The Lord run out of rocks for you to move?" She went back to pounding the dough with renewed vigor. Levi went and kissed her cheek anyway, and Rebekah bore it with grudging grace.

Deborah did not rise from her stool in the corner of the room, but eyed him suspiciously from beneath her hair. Levi's eldest daughter had been just entering puberty when Levi had left for the mountains, and clearly she'd sprinted through it in his absence. He did not attempt to hug her. "Were you bad?" he said, attempting jocularity. "Made to sit in the corner?"

"I sit where I please," she said sullenly.

"Excellent," said Levi under his breath, and then the angels walked in behind him.

His family's reaction to their entrance was much more dramatic. Rebekah gasped and dropped her mixing bowl. Dough spattered on her feet. Leah, immensely startled, toppled backward like a much younger child and sat down on the floor with a bump. Deborah's intake of breath was almost a hiss; her face turned bright red as she eyed the strangers up and down almost as wantonly as the jezebel. "Arms," said Levi, and as vacantly as a golem Deborah pulled a shawl over her bare shoulders for propriety.

Perhaps Levi should have warned them, but a man had to take his entertainment where he could.

"So, deigning to pay us a visit? The Lord run out of rocks for you to move?"

It seemed the angels had been born in a barn. Levi walked behind them to close the door, glancing into the street as he did so. About a dozen people had followed them home; urchins, jezebels, and Crass-men. Now might have been an apropos time for Lilith to have swooped and snatched a few, breathing fire, but Levi did not sense the demon anywhere near. He closed the door firmly.

"Dad?" said Deborah, coming up close beside him.

"It's good to see you all," said Levi to his family. "I acquitted myself well in the Deeps, as best I remember. I was true and faithful to the Lord. And as you see, we have guests."

"From the *Deeps*?" said Rebekah.

Levi turned to the angels politely. With their strange double-act prose, they spoke in Levi's house for the first time. "Not the Deeps." "We are from beyond." "We thank you, Levi." "And we extend our gratitude to your family for their hospitality."

"This is my wife, Rebekah," said Levi. "My daughters, Deborah and Leah. And you are...?"

"We fell here," said one as if it explained everything, and the other added, "We have no names."

"No names?" said Deborah. "Great. Nothing odd about *that*."

"They're guests, Deborah," said Levi mildly. "Show courtesy."

His wife came forward with a bowl of water to wash their guests' feet, as was the custom, but her hands shook so hard that she slopped the water as she kneeled.

The angels stepped away delicately. "Please." "That is not necessary." Nor was it; their bare feet were smooth and bore not even the merest specks of dust. Her eyes lingering, Rebekah gave a tiny groan.

Clearly Levi needed to assert some control. "Perhaps you would like to rest from your long, uh, downward journey," he said to the nameless ones, rather pointedly.

"We do not rest," they said, whereupon—without even a glance at Levi—Deborah picked up the ball and responded with unimpeachable courtesy, "Then, we beseech you, allow us a few brief moments as a family to prepare you a fitting repast," and guided them through the curtain into the back area of the house, where the sleeping and ablutions rooms were.

As she came back immediately, Rebekah said "Deborah, that was rude and—"

"—and well done," said Levi.

"Well done?" Rebekah looked horrified. "Addressing such beings with such familiarity?"

"*I'm* not the one on my knees," Deborah pointed out coolly, and went to pick up her sister.

"I'm scared of them," said Leah. "What do they want with us?"

Which was exactly the right question. But Levi had no answer. "How are you all? Are you well?"

"Well enough," muttered Rebekah, back on her feet now and opening and closing baskets to see what food she had in the house.

"Deborah's had a boyfriend," said Leah, rather gleefully.

"Hush, brat," said Deborah. "But if I have, I'm not the only one."

"What?" Leah, outraged, jabbed her older sister in the stomach. "Not I, not hardly, not boys, blech!" and made a face as if she was chewing dirt, but Levi, one step ahead, glanced over to where Rebekah labored over the meal with averted eyes.

"Leah, help your mother. Deborah, I need to talk to you."

"Boys like to look at me!" Deborah

cried. "I've done nothing wrong! It's all just gossip and...slander!"

"And you swear that?"

She met his eye defiantly. "Do I need to?"

"Leah, didn't I tell you to help your mother? Deborah, didn't I ask to speak to you alone? *Now*, please."

From dealing with Deborah as a child, Levi knew she was about to explode. He gave her a solemn wink and shook his head slightly, and the stinging words died on her lips. She looked at him quizzically, then shrugged and stalked from the room.

"I'll deal with this," he said to his wife.

"Of course," Rebekah said sarcastically. "Just as you always have. She's impossible, Levi. The time for you to be a *father* was six months ago, or six years. You can't just *appear*."

Levi thought of the angels again, since that was exactly what they'd done. "No, I'm sure you're right."

Deborah waited just outside the front door, staring at the small crowd who stood in the shade across the road. "Those fregging angels are going to be trouble for us," she said.

"Language." Levi took her arm and ushered her around the corner of the house, out of sight of the growing mob. "Are you all right?"

"What, me? Of course. What about *you*?"

"Yes."

Despite her familiarity, despite the easy way they'd worked the situation with Rebekah and the angels, Levi found himself alone with someone he hardly knew. "How long was I away?"

"Seven months," she said resentfully. "And eighteen days. Not that *I* was the one counting."

Far more than the forty days and nights he had expected, then. This was not spring, but autumn. Levi tried to keep the shock from registering on his face. He should have guessed, he now realized; from the change in Deborah, from the length of Leah's hair, the depth of Rebekah's animosity, even the position of the sun in the sky. Any one of a dozen clues.

The Lord's demands on him were heavy.

"Well," he said at last. "I've missed a lot, then."

She shrugged, and he remembered his excuse for calling her out here in the first place. "And you've had a man?"

She looked at him.

"Deborah. It's just me. Nobody else has to know."

She laughed. "Everyone else thinks they know already."

"So?"

"Not a *man*. A boy. And I was careful. I'm not with child. I was just playing. I just wanted to know how it all *worked*, Dad."

Despite his half-horror, Levi laughed. "Yes. *You*? Of course you did. But, Deborah—"

"I need to show you something," she said, and pulled him toward a lean-to against the side of the house, a small shack he didn't recognize, barely anything, perhaps a hut for tools. She did a complicated thing to its door handle that he didn't catch, and opened the door.

He didn't know what he'd expected, but certainly not this.

Tools, yes, and a second door that must lead into the house. But also a strange object: two flat circles of wood, joined with straight, sturdy bars. She lifted it and pushed at the rear wheel, which spun with a clicking sound.

Levi had just spent forty days—no, seven *months*—driving the giant machines of the Lord, but the memories of that had faded. Deborah's contraption confounded him. "What is it?"

"Everyone else thinks they know already."

"This is my third attempt. Mother made me burn the first two, and then we came to, well, an agreement. But this version is better anyway. See how easily?" She spun the wheel again. "And the lever here, look."

"Yes?"

"I was at the Clockwork Tower, winding the mechanism as you taught me." Levi suffered another split-minded moment. Had he taught Deborah to do that? Obviously so. "And, looking at those *cogs*, I thought of this."

As a cart it could never balance, and the load it would bear on its crossbeam would be small. Yet to the other half of Levi's brain, the now-hidden half, it seemed important. "You're going to have to tell me, Deborah."

His obtuseness startled her. She touched his forehead, miming scorn, as if he had a fever that befuddled him; a jokey gesture from her long-ago childhood. "It carries a person, Dad. You ride it as you'd ride a camel or an ass, with one leg on each side. Stand astride it and push till the wheels roll, then rocking this hand-lever applies more strength to propel you forward than you can apply directly with your legs. Faster than walking or even running, yet—"

"You've ridden *astride* this thing?" Levi backed away from his daughter's invention as if it were a snake. Wild images of her shame flooded his mind. No wonder Deborah was slandered, no wonder her reputation had grown so base and contemptible....

Deborah put her hand on her hip, reminding him fleetingly of the jezebel. Her hair fell over her eyes. "Dad. Really? I just told you I played with a boy, and you're all hot and bothered about me putting my leg over *this*?"

"Well," said Levi. "*This* you did in public."

Then the hidden portion of his brain caught up. "But, yes, it's very clever."

She had designed and built this all by herself. Deborah had never seen the engines of God's creation. She had not been above and beneath the world as Levi had; his daughter's skills were born of her own intelligence, her own gifts and efforts.

And the twin-wheeled conveyance was truly remarkable. Especially the lever, so that legs and one hand could all assist in powering it, while the second hand steered. How fast might someone travel on such a thing?

"I'm very proud of you," he muttered.

"Pardon?"

Levi forced himself to focus. They didn't have time for this. Trouble was coming that he did not know how to avert. "Deborah, I need you to help me. With the angels."

"Yes," she said coolly, and Levi realized she had been expecting this.

"I need your opinion. I can't trust my own perceptions. Are they truly from God? Do you trust them? Tell me what you *really* think, Deborah, not what I might prefer to hear."

"Dad, I've seen them for all of thirty seconds."

"Later. Tonight. Just help me."

"All right." She mulled it over. "I can speak my mind to them, then? Ask them questions?"

"Be careful. But, yes."

"Then you'll have to help me too, because Mother will demand I be seen and not heard."

"About that," said Levi with difficulty. "About your mother?"

A long silence fell. Eventually, Deborah said, "Leah has a big mouth."

"And thank God *that* doesn't run in the family," said Levi.

"I can't tell you. Mother and I made an agreement."

"Deborah."

"It's the only reason she lets me play with *this*," she said. "And I had to build a whole extra *room* for it. You see that door?"

"Deborah, I'm your father. I asked you a question."

"And she's my mother."

Levi sighed. "When I come back, I'm not good with people. It's as if I'm blind. I can't read expressions well. I don't know what's going on. I need you, Deborah."

Even as he said the words, Levi realized he was almost encouraging his daughter to lie to him. But he didn't think she would.

"Mordecai," she said.

Levi felt a sudden ringing in his ears, a whoosh of blood in his head. He staggered and Deborah was there, adroitly twisting her shoulder under his hand so he could lean on her. "Oh," he said, blinking rapidly. Of all the people Rebekah could have got herself immorally involved with in his absence: *Mordecai*?

"So, *you* be careful," said Deborah. "And, come on. We really shouldn't leave her alone with those gorgeous men any longer."

Levi put his other hand on the twin-wheeled conveyance. "What do you call it?"

"What, this wooden thing?" Deborah said, and stood primly upright, mimicking the angels. "'It Has No Name.'"

"No, really."

"I, uh, call it my Wooden Ass," she said. "But as you might imagine, that's not something I've shared with anyone else."

Levi laughed again. Damn the Deeps, damn its infernal—sacred—machines. His family was here; this was the real world. "I'll smooth things over with your mother. I'll make sure you can keep this, find you time to work on it. I could even help you develop it...but only if you want me to."

"We really shouldn't leave her alone with those gorgeous men any longer."

Deborah smiled. "All right."

She fastened the door closed, and they walked back around the house. Levi said, "Remember, I just scolded you. Try to look less happy."

Deborah grinned again, then her face slid back into the sullen expression of resentment she'd worn when he first arrived. "Yeah. Lousy father. Overbearing jerk."

"Arrogant slut," said Levi.

They hugged briefly, out of sight of the house windows, and went back inside.

* * * *

"God is not so apparent in all His Houses..." "As He is to you, in this one."

"I see," said Levi, cutting mutton and putting a piece in his mouth. The angels seemed perturbed at having to touch the meat with their fingers. He wondered what—and how—they usually ate. He was mildly surprised they ate at all.

He looked around the table. His family chewed industriously, not looking up. They'd picked a fine time to lose their tongues. "And so, you are from another House?" he prompted.

One nodded. "We are visitors," said the other.

"And so this is not the first time you've been out of Heaven?"

They sat very still, columns of white and blue. Unlike his daughters there was no fidgeting, no scratching, no drumming of fingers or heels. Perhaps each was waiting for the other. Or perhaps they had no answer.

Levi persisted. "You didn't expect it to be like this, did you? Here in Shadom?"

"It's very nice here," said one, politely. "But yes, it's very different." "Things change." "Variations."

"Like what?" he said.

One cleared his throat. "You are fishing."

"Fishing?" Deborah joined the conversation at last. "What is *fishing*?"

Shadom's water came from wells. Deborah had never been under the sea, never even seen a river. Levi had so much of Creation to show her. But he kept his face neutral, and waited for the angels to answer.

"Fishing is seeking information through careful questions."

"And we shouldn't do that?"

Rebekah flicked at Deborah with a cloth. "Speak only when you're addressed, daughter!"

"Please," said Levi to his wife, and then to the angels, "If you are uncomfortable with questions, please tell us. We wish only to serve God as best we can. More corn?"

"And to understand," said Deborah sweetly, "just what it is you want with my father. Assuming it's my father you're interested in." Provocatively, she held eye contact with the leftmost angel.

Rebekah picked up her cup of water and dashed it into her daughter's face. "For shame! Leave our table! Did I raise you to be a jezebel?"

Levi raised his hand. "Hush...."

He fully expected Rebekah to turn on him next and blast him with her frustrations. "And *you*!" she might have shouted. "After the better part of a *year* you just walk in unannounced and expect to be treated as the head of this household?"

Rebekah did turn to him. But she spoke quietly. "See? She's doing it to us

again. And every single time, you fall for it."

And Levi understood. Almost since the day of her birth, Deborah had been devious. Precociously smart, she had mastered the skill of playing her parents off against each other. And even today, he now realized with a sinking feeling, how adeptly she'd distracted Levi from his questions about her behavior by taking him to see her wooden ass.

What more natural strategy for Deborah than to distract Levi from her own sin by accusing her mother of a bigger one? Was Levi proving himself a bigger fool with every passing minute?

He looked at Deborah. He had trusted her, given her permission to speak at table, and she was using it to flirt with the angels. Or was she just so mired in her own depravity that she couldn't control herself, faced with creatures of such beauty?

Deborah pushed her chair back. As she wiped the water from her face, the shawl fell from her bare shoulders. She seemed very calm. Why wasn't she shouting back at her mother, like usual?

Because she didn't need to. She gestured minutely across the table.

The angel was blushing.

"Deborah, leave the room," said Levi curtly.

"What?" Deborah raised her arms in outrage, and with a smooth motion Levi rose to his feet, seized his daughter's wrist and dragged her away into the kitchen area.

Frustrated, she punched him on the shoulder. He put his lips to her ear. "It's all right. I saw."

Deborah's face contorted with feigned anger, and she hissed back, "Something isn't right. Why would a true angel of the Lord be tempted by me? If they were pure, would they look at me twice? And if they have no virtue, then what are they?"

"We can hear you, you know," one of the angels said mildly.

"And we admire your ingenuity," said the other.

"If not your honesty."

"Oh well." Deborah turned and smiled right at Rebekah with an almost malevolent expression, and with a sick feeling Levi realized his home life had gone to Hell in a grass basket.

Instantly, Rebekah was on her feet. "You two! You two! What is it always between you two?" She picked up the dish of corn and aimed it, and with a scream little Leah slid off her chair and hid under the table against the coming storm.

And that was the precise moment when the first rock hit the front of Levi's house.

* * * *

More Crass-men now, close to twenty of them, lined up across the street like a challenge. Levi saw pots in their hands, amphorae of mash beer. Even from here he could smell it on them. Nearby stood a squad of pouting jezebels, grouped together for safety, creatures of small intelligence and perverse appetites. And children, youths, more arriving every moment.

The sun was setting behind the mountains. Despite the evening warmth the adjacent houses were shut up tight without even a candle burning in their windows, as his neighbors carefully minded their own business.

Naturally, there was never a Justiceman around when he needed one.

"You would offer violence to servants of the Lord?"

"What do you want?" said Levi to the mob.

"Your guests." A tall, bulky Crass-man stepped forward with a leer, and with a small shock Levi recognized Mordecai, his wife's alleged lover.

He tried to push it from his mind. It was not relevant to their current danger.

"My guests are my guests," said Levi mildly. "You have no business with them, I believe."

"Keep 'em all to yourselves, would you?"

"Bring 'em out," called a jezebel. "We just want to see 'em. Our competition. With *them* here, nobody's looking at us twice."

Levi had no doubt which way this was going. "You would offer violence to servants of the Lord?"

"Who said violence? We just want to look."

"Pretty boys, pretty boys," said a Crass youth not much older than a boy himself. "Bring 'em out, we say." He took a swig from the amphora he carried, and passed it to the next man on the line.

"Blue skin," said a woman. "Not natural, is it?"

Levi glanced back at the doorway of his house. Fortunately the angels had the wisdom not to show themselves. "They're under my hospitality and my protection."

Mordecai stepped forward. Levi stood his ground, gripping his staff till his knuckles whitened. "Levi, oh master Levi," said the Crass-man. "We all know you're good as gold. But not so smart." He rapped his knuckles against his own forehead. "No common sense, not even with your own family."

"My family is my business."

"They're your *first* business," said Mordecai. "Those pale men are nothing to you. You think they're angels? They're not angels. Angels are going to come *here*, to Shadom, to see *you*? No, they're not, and you know it as well as I."

"Angels or not, they're still under my roof."

"They don't have to be," said one of the other men. "Bring 'em out, and you go back inside. Enjoy your evening. And we'll enjoy ours."

"Hospitality is a sacred trust," said Levi. He braced himself, feet apart, his staff grounded in the dust by his side. "I would sooner yield up my daughters than allow a hair to be harmed on the head of a guest."

"Oh, great," came a caustic female voice from behind Levi. "Thanks a *lot*."

Deborah had arrived. Mordecai smiled nastily. "Evening, miss. How's your *mother*?" He leered.

"Oh," said Levi involuntarily.

"See?" Deborah muttered. "You thought I'd invent something like that?" Stepping forward, she addressed the Crass-man. "Sir. My

mother sends her fondest regards, and we'll need a moment to discuss your generous offer. We won't make you wait long."

Levi stared at his daughter, baffled.

"Come on then, Dad," she said, turning on her heel and stalking back toward the house. "Family discussion."

* * * *

Levi was shaking as he closed the door behind them. "I can't *believe* how you talk to men," he said to Deborah. "It's not...."

He stopped, dazed by the hive of activity before him. The angels were already boarding up one window, Rebekah and Leah the other.

"Well, don't just stand there," said his wife. "Nail the door shut and pull the cupboard in front of it."

"Family discussion?" said Levi.

"None needed," said Deborah, seizing a plank. "For the first time in my entire life, we're all agreed."

"They shan't have them," said Rebekah. "Give angels up to the mercy of Crass-men? God would turn away. We'd be forever damned."

"You asked me for sanctuary," said Levi to the blue men. "Before you even asked for hospitality. 'Sanctuary,' you said. Because you knew this would happen. You intended it. You put my family in danger."

For once the angels did not look convincingly innocent. "We are in danger also." "Do we not bleed, just as you do?"

"Then this must be important," he said roughly. "Why don't you tell us *why*?"

"We shall," said the Beautiful Ones. "Just as soon as we've boarded up your windows."

The pounding was almost deafening. "And you think they can't hear this outside, what you're doing?"

"It'll take the Crass-men a while to warm up," said little Leah. "First they'll shout and throw things some more. Then they'll drink more beer and wait for the sun to go down. We have time before they get *really* angry."

He stared at his little girl. "Oh, Leah."

Deborah nodded. "Tousle-head is right. A challenge will make their victory all the sweeter."

"Why do I go away?" said Levi, desperately. "Why do I allow myself to miss your growing up?"

"I don't know," said Deborah. "Why do you?"

"You're asking *us* this?" said Leah, who was all set to grow up just as difficult as her sister. "And *now*?"

"First they'll shout and throw things some more. Then they'll drink more beer and wait for the sun to go down. We have time before they get really angry."

"I'll not see them harm you," said Levi.

"Leah," said Rebekah. "More nails."

Levi walked close enough to murmur in his wife's ear. Even approaching her was an effort. "And while I was away, you lay with *him*?"

"For God's sake," said Rebekah. "For once in your life, stop talking and *do* something."

* * * *

"Your God is testing you," said the Beautiful Ones.

"Don't you mean *our* God?" said Deborah quickly.

Levi held up his hand. "Why are you really here?"

The blue-white men looked at each other with identical blank expressions, and sighed indistinguishable sighs. "God will destroy this city."

"Oh," said Levi. Rebekah sat down suddenly, just as Leah had done a couple of hours earlier, but on a stool.

"God will destroy Shadom." "And we need to get you out of here." "Before it happens."

Levi shook his head. "Nonsense."

"How many in this city truly believe in Him?"

"All of them," said Rebekah.

"Fifty?" said the angels. "Twenty of them?" "Ten?" "Five?" "Name five truly virtuous men, and maybe God could be persuaded to spare Shadom." "But you, Levi—" "You are God's agent in this reality." "You work the heights." "You work the Deeps." "You are God's Engineer."

The continuous back-and-forth was hypnotic. Levi felt like he should concentrate just a little harder. "Engineer?"

Rebekah snapped, "God is *here*! We see His work around us every day!"

"But you do not see *Him*." "Less easy to worship a God you cannot see."

"Worship?" said Levi. The word was unfamiliar, but it sounded profound.

The angels looked at each other. "Praise." "Adore."

"You *praise* God?" said Deborah.

They blinked. "Most believers do." "We do not need to, personally..." "The words we use may be unfamiliar." "From the outside, God's work looks different." "God's house contains many mansions." "Different strokes."

Levi rapped his fist on the table. "Enough. Back to 'Destroy this city'?"

"Yes." "Yes."

"We should live that long," said Rebekah, glancing at their boarded-up windows.

"God won't do that," said Levi. "Listen. When I leave Shadom, I do God's work. He speaks to me. Tells me what to do, watches me do it. I don't *remember* it well, but I do remember it. I have...an *advantage* when it comes to belief. The people who live in Shadom, who work the crops and the goats and trade with the desert caravans, it's not always so clear to them."

They shrugged. "Not relevant."

"Of *course* it's relevant," Levi said. "God couldn't harm them for doubting Him, when He doesn't *show* Himself to them!"

"Why do you still think these angels are really angels," said Deborah, "when they're not even describing the same God?"

"It is the same God!" said one of the angels forcefully.

The other one cleared its throat. "God has a lot invested in you, Levi."

"Invested?"

"You are special." "Good artisans are hard to find." "You must be begotten, not created." "For creativity itself cannot be created." "You understand?"

Deborah leaned forward. The angels looked worried. "Explain more clearly," she said. "If you're perfect, it shouldn't be hard to choose perfect words."

"And you have only minutes to convince us," Levi added.

As the darkness grew, it was as if the angels shone from within. Their faint silver-blue reflections glimmered from the glazed pots and cups. "Very well." "We will try." "It is not as easy as it may appear to create and guide a being with free will." "If obedience is mindless, it is worthless."

There was a long pause. "That's it? We're supposed to understand that?" said Levi.

"It's a fine balance," said one of the angels almost apologetically.

"But, if people disobey only out of ignorance...."

It was Deborah's turn to rap on the table for attention. "So you can keep us safe? The men outside, who want to, well, do wicked things to you. You can protect yourselves from them? And keep us safe as well?"

The angels looked fearfully at the window, and then at Levi.

"I'd say that's a 'No.'" said Leah.

Rebekah slumped, her head in her hands.

Deborah walked up to them. "You're very beautiful. And you're absolutely fregging useless."

Levi felt a familiar prickle at the back of his neck. With a sudden clarity, he knew what was about to happen. But not why.

"Here's how this works," he said. "We save you from the Crass-men. Then you save us from the destruction of Shadom."

One angel glanced upward conspiratorially, and nodded. The other looked relieved. "Get us to high ground."

"I thought this conversation couldn't get any stupider," said Rebekah. "But then, all of a sudden?"

They all jumped as a pot exploded into smithereens on the roof. The catcalling outside their house was turning into a baying that Levi had never heard out of human throats.

"Don't believe them," said Deborah to Levi. "You make it so much easier for them when you put the words right into their mouths. Trust me, I know how that works." She still stared at the angels from close range, right on the edge of igniting into fury. If that happened it might take another ten minutes for Levi to regain control. And they might not have ten minutes.

Levi walked up to his daughter and put his hand on her shoulder. She stiffened, but did not twist away.

"Let them be. I have an idea to get us out of here, Deborah. But I can't do it without you."

* * * *

Out from the lean-to crashed the most ungainly vehicle ever glimpsed in Shadom. Deborah rode it, Levi's scandalous hussy of a daughter, her legs astride it, one hand steering while the other pumped the lever-handle that drove the back wheel harder and the wooden ass faster than it could otherwise go. Behind her on the seat her little sister clung to her back, screaming incoherent but gleeful words of encouragement as they sped over the bumpy streets of the city.

"I thought this conversation couldn't get any stupider."

In the cart behind were the two blue-white men, their faces seeming even whiter with alarm in the dusk half-light. Swaying dangerously, they kicked backward against the ground to help scoot the vehicle along. Deborah was strong, but not quite strong enough to propel the four of them faster than a man could run, all by herself.

The mob cried out in shock. For all the ass's shakiness, it was still absolutely the first human-powered getaway vehicle they had ever seen. The sheer surprise factor allowed the fugitives to ride fifty feet beyond the unruly throng of Crass-men and jezebels.

Mordecai leaped forward with a roar, as if meaning to chase down the wooden-ass cart himself. He could probably have done it, too; of all the men there he was the strongest and fittest. But Levi walked out of his house with Rebekah two paces behind him. The patriarch and his wife strode up to Mordecai and confronted him, their faces as stern as their rapidly receding youngest daughter's screeches were gleeful.

Only then did the other Crass-men recover, the younger men setting off pell-mell after Deborah and the blue angels.

"Should have fled with your whore of a daughter," said Mordecai. "You skinny joke of a man, nose in the air? Leaving your family to fend for how long, while you gallivant in the hills? Should've scarpered with your bum-chums, oh yes."

"No," said Levi. "Because I'll do whatever I must, to keep my family and my guests from harm. But I will never turn my back and run from a man like you."

"Gone too far, this, now, see?" said Mordecai. "We'll put you back in your house, and we'll seal it up with your own hammer and nails, tight as you like. And we'll burn it down with you inside. And then, off we'll go after those comely creatures of yours, who won't get so very far out in the desert, and we'll do to 'em what we were set to do all along. And they'll die on their knees, your daughters included. And that's how this ends."

"Which reminds me," said Levi. "Nobody calls my daughter a whore."

"Except me," muttered Rebekah.

Mordecai laughed, while Levi's neck prickled even more. "A whore, I say! And you know what, Levi?—she's the daughter of a whore! What d'you say to that?"

"Well, nothing," said Levi. "But I'll have to—"

And in mid-sentence he whirled his staff, catching Mordecai hard on the side of the head. Because clearly

Levi had to fight, but when faced with an adversary of Mordecai's bulk even an ethical man had no call to fight fair.

Mordecai howled and staggered, and the remaining crowd—those not chasing after the comely behinds of the Beautiful Ones, or standing scattered with their hands on their knees panting after giving up the chase—howled too. In their case it was with glee, for they loved a good fight and so rarely got to see one.

Levi whacked Mordecai again, and Mordecai raised a fist like a ham and thumped Levi back, knocking him fifteen feet across the road to sprawl headlong into the dirt.

On the ground, his head spinning, Levi heard Mordecai's approaching footsteps and the sound of a blade being unsheathed. A modicum of self-defense was called for, but Levi was too dizzy to do any more than prop himself up on his forearms. The odds of him getting up before Mordecai arrived seemed remote.

An unearthly screech went straight through Levi's head. His first thought was that he had never heard Rebekah make such a sound. Then a profound black stench washed over him, followed by a gory wet *crunch*, and a man's scream cut off before it even got properly started.

Levi looked up to see the men and women of the mob scatter and tumble as Lilith dragged the corpse of Mordecai through their midst. Soaring sharply upward, the demon shrieked again and ripped, and a rain of blood and meat pattered down across an area the size of the city square. A disembodied arm bounced off the roof of Levi's house.

He stood, trying not to vomit. None of the leaderless mob seemed inclined to challenge him further. Rebekah had taken three steps toward the epicenter of the falling gore, her hands up to her temples.

"We have to go," he said. "Come *on*."

"I'm staying," Rebekah said dully. "Mordecai. Someone has to clean him up."

"Let his friends do it."

Rebekah closed her eyes. "Please, Levi. Don't make this any harder than it is already."

"But," said Levi, waving his arms, "the girls!"

"*Your* girls. I've looked after them long enough. It's your turn now."

She stood before him, a pillar, unbreachable. Levi saw no softness in her, no tears. Only bitterness and salt.

"You really lay with Mordecai?" he said.

"You're not here. You're never here!"

"I'm here now!"

"I'll do whatever I must, to keep my family and my guests from harm."

"Not for me," she said. "I don't want you any more. Just go chase after your damned daughters, Levi. Don't come back."

"Gladly." Levi turned in the direction the wooden ass had fled, toward the city gate he had entered through just a few hours earlier.

A gate which, he now saw, was closed.

"Crap!" shouted Levi, and began to run.

Next moment, the claws of Lilith wrapped him and dragged him high into the darkening sky.

* * * *

"Open the gate," growled Lilith. "Or I'll have to knock it down. And that would be work."

The desert spun dizzily hundreds of feet below. Lilith's insane speed had carried them over and past the wall and she was looping back around. Clamped by the right thigh and the left shoulder, Levi could not twist to look up at her, only down at the hard shadowy ground. The wound in his leg cracked open, and his blood once again began to flow.

Despite everything he still clutched his staff, and now he remembered what it could do.

Maybe it was the altitude, that or being outside the city walls, but the knowledge of God's Engineering that had dropped away from Levi on his return to Shadom came back in a rush.

As Lilith swooped, Levi's vertigo vanished. Just inside the wall he saw a small flash of blue and a handful of ants running toward it; Deborah's cart ("rickshaw," said a voice inside his head) had stopped at the gate and the young bucks at the vanguard of the mob were approaching them at speed.

"Put me down on the left side," he said. The gate grew in front of his eyes, and then Lilith dropped him onto the wall and Levi ran full tilt for the guard-house, his cloak streaming out behind him.

Three guards awaited, one still clutching a wineskin even as he drew his blade with his other hand. Still running, Levi pressed a whorl on his staff and a whoosh of flame shot out over the guards' heads. Immediately all resistance crumbled. The guards dropped the knives, and Levi snarled, "Open the gate!" which, obligingly, they turned and did.

Tanned faces had turned upward. Nobody had missed the gout of fire that Levi had magicked out of nowhere. The gate creaked open and, thirty feet below, Deborah calmly sat back down on her wooden ass and drove the angels out of the city of Shadom.

Levi slid down the ladder to the ground and faced the dozen Crassmen who awaited him. They fanned out around him.

He looked at his staff. He well recalled the fire he had made with it just moments before; the afterimages still fluttered in his eyes. But Levi was back at ground level now, and only smart enough to realize that there was something he had already forgotten. God's knowledge had left him just as abruptly as it had arrived.

The mob, of course, didn't know that.

"Come on, then," he said. "Who wants to burn first?" He brandished the staff in what he hoped was a competent street-fighting stance.

Above them in the night, Lilith roared by. An odor of dankness washed them. The mob hesitated, and

Levi said scornfully, "Really, lads, just go home," and walked away through the gate.

They let him go. The gate crunched closed behind him with impressive finality.

* * * *

If he had run, Levi could have caught up with his daughters and angels in no time. Yet he chose to be alone, to contemplate the enormity of what had happened. Once reunited, it would take Leah only moments to ask, *What now, Daddy*? And Levi wanted to have an answer for her by then.

Besides, if Levi ran the way he usually did outside the city, he could crash into them at speeds they might not survive, which would at least have been the birth of Irony in this particular mansion of God's Creation.

So Levi trudged on, calming himself, trying to rationalize a capricious world.

A philosophical calm that lasted all of five minutes before his neck prickled furiously and Lilith snatched him away from the ground once more.

* * * *

"Are you going to kill me?"

"You're still alive," said Lilith. "Think about it."

She stood before him on the mountainside, gaunt, ugly, marbled with muscle, chokingly female. Lilith was screech-owl, baby-slayer, succubus and seed-stealer, plunderer and destroyer, and the blazing bonfire beside her only amplified her stench.

"Are you Temptation, then?" he said doubtfully.

She cackled, and shimmied in an abhorrent parody of flirtation. "Why? Are you tempted?"

Levi stepped back.

"I am Retribution," she said. "I am Destruction. You don't find me beautiful?"

"I...." Levi took a deep breath, wondering how such a misshapen creature could be so charismatic. "I find you impressive."

"Not a lie, and yet not the whole truth," said Lilith cheerfully. "Well spoken, Levi."

"My daughters?"

"Will follow the light and join us presently. And then we'll go higher. But for now, how about a fireside chat?"

Levi peered down off the mountain into the shadows.

"Nothing will harm them," she said. "My word on it."

"What *are* you?"

"Ah, the eternal question." Lilith preened, a giant predatory bird. "God fashioned me with His own hands. I was His first woman. Not long afterward, He created camels. Since then I've been helping to clean up His other mistakes."

"Mistakes?" Levi followed a God who could suffer a Lilith to live? "May I sit down?"

Lilith gestured generously. "This world, too, is one of God's first tries. Even with your valiant behind-the-scenes efforts to shore up its foundations, He couldn't stabilize it. His more recent attempts at world-creation have been more successful."

"And the angels?"

He brandished the staff in what he hoped was a competent street-fighting stance.

Lilith laughed mockingly. "*I* am God's avenging angel, and always have been. They are only angels by the lights of *their* world. Which is to say they're fondly imagined, rarely seen, always over-interpreted, and largely ineffectual."

"They spoke of destroying Shadom. But since they could barely drive in a nail, even with both of them holding the hammer...."

"Oh, they can't destroy anything," Lilith agreed. "But I can."

She gestured at the sky. And, not two hours after nightfall, the sun rose again.

Levi toppled with a cry, shielding his eyes. The baleful crimson orb that lurched back above the western horizon was not the sun he knew, nor could it reappear in such a position unless Lilith had torqued the entire world. Yet there it was, the color of brimstone.

"And that isn't even the best part," said Lilith. "Observe if you please: the dawn of the titans."

Giants were shambling in from the west, huge beings, hundreds of feet tall. Shaped like men, yet not men, unless men were fashioned from dirt with sigils of doom carved into their massive flat foreheads.

"Golems," Levi breathed. Striding toward Shadom, carrying immense pails that bubbled and steamed. The ground beneath the colossi sizzled when they slopped. "No. I beg you—"

"Beg till you bleed, Levi. They answer to a Master mightier than I."

Levi estimated their distance and speed. For all their size it would take the titans over an hour to arrive at Shadom. But what could he do in an hour?

"Tell me," said Levi urgently. "The angels spoke of worship. I need to know how to do that."

"That's a later idea. It won't work here."

"But—"

"Levi." Lilith leaned forward, her beak of a nose right up in his face. He would have recoiled from such ugliness, and from the musky stink that came with it, if he had not been captivated by the deep compassion in the demon's eyes. So Levi stayed where he was, his own eyes wide and unblinking as he inhaled her primal femaleness, and from close range he barely understood her words. "Levi, in your heart you must already know. God has already left the building."

And so all that Levi could do was watch and wait.

For all his horror, there was a certain fascination to the golems' advance on Shadom. The men arraying to defend the city walls looked puny, the line of people fleeing eastward slow and futile.

Lilith gave no order, and Levi saw no signal given, but down on the plains the foremost of the titans stepped forward, reached into his pail, and flung

a heavy pawful of brimstone.

The wall fizzed. Houses exploded. The Misbegotten-of-God fell on Shadom in mighty waves.

It took free will to create, but none to destroy. Perhaps mercifully, darkness and clouds soon obscured the city's fiery end.

* * * *

The bonfire was merely embers and glow by the time the others tramped into camp: Deborah and Leah holding hands, and several minutes behind them, two white-blue beings who finally had the grace to look dusty. Levi waited for their sarcastic comments about him taking it easy while they slogged uphill all night, or perhaps about his consorting with demons, but his daughters merely slumped into his arms to be hugged.

None of them looked back toward the scorched plain where Shadom had once lain. Nobody mentioned Rebekah's name.

Lilith cleared her throat. "Well. Now we're all together, shall we go on?"

* * * *

The cave was square, and eerily illuminated with a silver-blue radiance.

This was not how Levi had imagined it. Not the way his faded, holey memories had led him to believe.

For one thing, it was all much smaller than he remembered. The machines of the Lord were huge, but not larger than the mountains they had helped him move; the pit beyond was deep, but it was not an abyss that could swallow worlds.

The vehicle that rose up by his side was indeed immense—on seeing it his daughters had taken it for just another wall, until Deborah had realized that the disks within its giant treads were wheels—but it was silent and inert. And God's voice was not in Levi's mind to guide him. Although Levi had the sense of having been here before, he viewed it through a lens dark and cold, devoid of the Lord's warming breath. The power of these machines did not stir him; the vital knowledge did not whirl across his brain. Here stood Levi, God's Engineer, as useless as the machinery that surrounded him.

Levi could not even recall how to get into the high room from which the silver beast was controlled. He knew that once the raucous din of its engines filled his ears, it would be a craft capable of performing wonders. Perhaps even of repelling the titans that had destroyed Shadom? For a moment Levi's gaze lingered over its sleek lines, and the giant arm that rose from the body of the machine into the sky. If Levi had only gotten here sooner, if he could remember how to drive it, if he had maneuvered it down to the plains....

"Beg till you bleed, Levi. They answer to a Master mightier than I."

Such speculation was useless. The scouring of Shadom had been the Lord's will. Levi could not have stopped it, and so the deaths of his neighbors and friends, and even his wife, should not stain his conscience. Should they?

Other machines stood haphazardly around the enormous room, yet they seemed utilitarian and unwieldy, even...uninteresting.

But not to his daughters. Leah's and Deborah's eyes sparkled, flooding with joy; they gaped right and left, across and upward, struck mute with wonder. To Levi's girls, God's Garage was a paradise beyond imagining. Yet Levi could see Deborah assessing and analyzing, already making her best guesses about how everything worked.

Out in the middle of the glossy floor she turned and flashed him a reproachful look. Levi understood; he had kept her away from this all her life. But he was giving it to her now.

* * * *

"God is an angry God." "A jealous God." "Implacable in His judgments." "Impatient with His mistakes."

Above them, the roof slid away. The clouds were also rolling back, to reveal a light-blue morning sky. Then, as Levi watched, the sky itself split, a jagged wound appearing over him like the tear in his own thigh. Beyond it he saw only a dim shifting haze.

"God's first worlds perished in flood, now this one will perish in fire." "Few are the things in this House that God would keep." "God strives to save the virtuous."

"Not the virtuous," said Deborah. "The *useful.*"

Levi almost looked around for Rebekah to scold her daughter, and felt an unexpected pang that she had perished, burned away without a second thought. He turned on the angels. "My wife. If the Lord made her lustful and did not give her the strength to resist, how could He punish her for that?"

The blue men looked uncomfortable.

"And how could a merciful God destroy a whole city?" He gestured at Lilith. At the still-clouded plains below.

"His mercy is not infinite." "What if mercy is not His main motivation?" They paused. "Much, we admit, is unclear." "Perhaps you should ask Him yourself."

"What *other* motivation could He have?" Levi demanded.

For the first and only time, the angels spoke together. "Progress. Growth. Development."

Lilith said, "Your world was one of God's early attempts, Levi. Be reasonable."

"You're all monsters," said Levi.

"We are not *virtuous*," Deborah persisted. "You want us because we have minds of our own. Creative minds. We're thinkers, makers. We can have conversations like this."

"Yes," said one of the angels.

"And we can be useful to you... somewhere else."

"Yes," said the other.

"And you're not really from Heaven, are you?"

The angels became very still.

"Yeah, we've known all along," said Deborah. "What, then? What type of

creatures are in league with Lilith?"

They shuddered.

"You're very quiet all of a sudden. You're making this up as you go, aren't you? Angels, my—"

She looked at Levi. "Ass," he said.

There was a long pause. "We are *like* angels." "We are engineers." "Not so different from angels." "And not so different from you, either."

They paused again. "Sometimes we improvise." "But we *did* come here to rescue you." "The Lord has more work for you."

"And if we don't want to be useful?"

Lilith yawned. "Then stay and boil, or wander off into the desert with the caravans. Good grief. But recall: just because you go with them, doesn't mean you don't have to do anything else they say. Remember *choice*?"

* * * *

They climbed the tall arm of the mighty machine, hand over hand. Struts jutted from the crane's trunk and arm, forming a ladder.

Leah climbed first. Deborah followed just a step below, guiding her sister's feet onto the struts and guarding her in case she slipped. Levi came after, trying not to look down, astonished at his daughters' pluck. The angels were already high above them, climbing as if Lilith herself were biting their heels.

"You're not coming with us?" Leah had said to the demon.

Lilith had shrugged. "I already exist there. And my work here isn't yet complete."

"Destroyer," said Levi.

"Someone has to do it."

Deborah grimaced. "But what if we need you, there?" Levi looked at her, surprised.

"Then you'll find me." The demon reached forward and chucked Deborah's chin, patted Leah. Levi instinctively raised his staff to protect them, but Lilith just grinned toothily, her underbite jutting up like a mountain range as she said to his daughters: "Never doubt it: *you* are the Beautiful Ones."

To Levi she had said, "All the work you did in this sandbox was not wasted. Much has been learned. Future versions will be better."

"Tell me where we're going."

"It would be hard to describe." The demon stretched upward, and a now-familiar gust of putrefaction swept them. "Enjoy your flight. Kiss kiss, now."

And with that as farewell, Lilith had taken to the air and soared away, a malign black bird.

The angels had started climbing the crane, leaving Levi and his girls alone on the floor of God's Garage.

"Well?" said Levi to Deborah.

She looked contemptuously up at the retreating blue forms. "Not even as far as I could throw them. But Lilith...."

"I know," said Levi. Despite her fearsome exterior and her stench, or perhaps because of them, Lilith had the ring of truth about her.

Now, from on high, Levi could see the flaws in this version of Creation; the fudges and cracks, the paint-overs. He remembered working on some of them himself.

God could do better. Perhaps He already had. It was an odd thought.

Above them, without even looking to see if Levi and the girls were following, the angels stepped off the crane into the gap in reality and vanished in the haze.

Levi continued to climb.

"Never doubt it: you are the Beautiful Ones."

He caught up to Deborah at the tower's tip. She was looking back at the ground beneath. "Wow. High."

At the edge of the rift, part of the blue sky was hanging down. Resisting the urge to touch it, Levi looked through and past it.

A cool breeze played with his hair, scented with herbs and another aroma which was pungent but not unpleasant. For a moment Levi beheld a swath of purple and a glimmer of gold that he thought must be the face of God. Then he saw lights beneath him through the rift, and gasped as perspective snapped in. There, as here, they were a *long* way up.

Levi could sense God now, or thought he could; just a mental nudge at his elbow, but whether from his own world or the new dark land before him, he could not tell.

The haze was clearing. Through the tear in the sky Levi saw a mountain range silhouetted against stars, and a sinuous silver pulse that might be a river or a lake. Cold fires glowed, scattered across the plains like jewels on velvet, each fire perhaps marking a dwelling, a home to someone.

Or, he thought dazedly, each fire might be a city.

They beheld another creation. Another mansion in the house of God. Sweat dripped down Levi's face.

It was time to leave the old world behind. Levi gathered his daughters in. "Ready?"

"No," said Leah, as Deborah said, "Yes."

"Just kidding," said Leah.

"Brat," said Deborah.

"Slut," said her sister.

"Girls. Some dignity, please."

Deborah hugged Leah. "Don't worry, tousle-head. Just enjoy the ride."

Levi put his arms around them. They fitted against him, snuggled against his side. They were growing up so fast.

Emptiness opened up around them. The future beckoned. He felt sticky and new. Smiling, his eyes wide open, Levi leaped.

He couldn't wait to see how it all turned out.

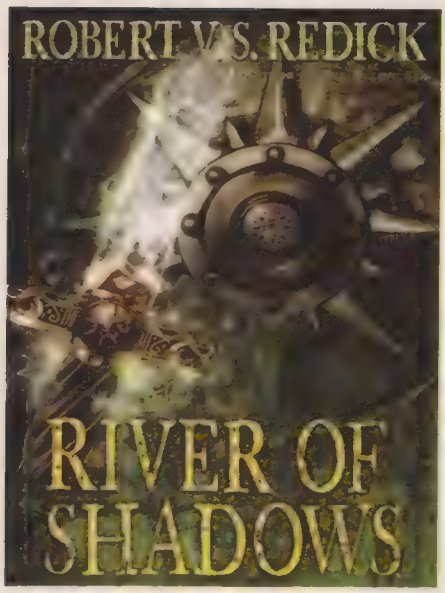
**Alan Smale** grew up in Yorkshire, England, but is now in the US to stay. By day he labors as a NASA research scientist; by night he sings bass with high-energy vocal band The Chromatics and is co-creator of their educational AstroCappella project. He has sold over thirty stories of fantasy and horror, alternate and twisted history to magazines including *Realms of Fantasy* (this is his sixth appearance), *Paradox, Abyss & Apex*, and *Dark Regions*, and anthologies *Panverse One, Panverse Two*, and *Writers of the Future #13*, as well as audio markets *Podcastle* and *Pseudopod*. His website is at www.alansmale.com.

# Books

by Paul Witcover and Elizabeth Bear

Epic fantasy, like every genre, comes with its own set of rules, which are, of course, not really rules at all but rather expectations that have come to be shared, consciously or unconsciously, by writers and readers. These are the touchstones of a genre: its defining and recurring themes, its plot elements, its archetypes and tropes. Those novels that fit most comfortably into the narrative and imaginative space we label epic fantasy are those which—again, whether consciously or unconsciously on the part of their writers—hew the closest to these genre touchstones; that is something a large number of readers will always be ready to reward with praise and dollars, whether the author is a Terry Brooks, who brought little originality to his iteration of Tolkien's masterpiece, or a George R. R. Martin, whose originality infused welcome new energy into the same all-but-exhausted tradition.

Another class of novel is less comfortably situated in its chosen genre, even to the point of seeming conflicted about being there in the first place. Such novels can expend considerable effort and ingenuity in, as it were, fitting in, while at the same time fighting to break free of what the author, on some level, must experience as too constraining. Often this results in an unreadable mess. But sometimes, in the hands of a smart and talented writer, the tension generated by these conflicting ambitions gives birth to something rich and strange, a whole that transcends the sum of its more ordinary parts. Such, for example, was China Miéville's breakthrough novel, *Perdido Street Station*. And such, albeit less spectacularly, is Robert V. S. Redick's *Chathrand* Voyage series, whose third volume, ***The River of Shadows*** **(Del Rey, trade paperback, 592 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-0-3455-2382-2)**, seems at times barely under its author's control—and exhilaratingly so, as if, to employ a metaphor in keeping with the novel, we are watching what may, almost from one page to the next, turn out to be either an extraordinary feat of seamanship or a catastrophic foundering. I'm betting on the former, and I think anyone who has read this novel's addictive predecessors, *The Red Wolf Conspiracy* and *The Ruling Sea*, will agree with me. Anyone who hasn't should remedy that right away—and beware of some spoilers below.




All the conventional machinery of epic fantasy is present in these books. A Dark Lord, Arunis, who commands evil sorcery, is in pursuit of a magical talisman, the Nilstone, which he will use to destroy or enslave the world of Alifros. He is opposed by a ragtag band of brave young people who are themselves touched by magic and charged by fate or some higher power with the task of opposing the Dark Lord and destroying the talisman. In this quest, they are assisted by a powerful if maddeningly cryptic and elusive wizard, Ramachni.

I don't think I do Redick an injustice to point out that this is all paint-by-numbers fantasy. And indeed, his books are at their least remarkable when he forces his plot and characters to conform to genre expectations—which he does quite abruptly at intervals, as if he's been so transported by the engrossing interplay of his world and characters that he's only just remembered the various MacGuffins and plot coupons he's placed in circulation. Yet these stock elements of the narrative are not superfluous; they are, after all, the skeleton upon which everything else depends. Redick handles them with rough competence, but you can tell his heart isn't really in it.

His imaginative and emotional investment is mainly in two other areas, and it's in those areas that these books leave the conventional behind and become exceptional.

The first is characterization. These are big books, set for the most part aboard a big ship—the *Chathrand* is a floating city, with a crew of over 700—and they feature a correspondingly large cast of characters, primary and secondary. But every single one of these characters is a unique individual, brought to life with the messy exuberance and attention to telling detail of a Dickens. Characters whom we see but fleetingly, or even only once, are nevertheless invested with distinct personalities—there are no placeholders or red shirts here. Redick paints broadly, often gleefully embracing caricature; his characters may not be strictly

lifelike, but they are nevertheless brimming over with life.

When it comes to his main characters—who number into the double digits—he lavishes even more attention. Pazel Pathkendle, an impulsive tarboy afflicted with a debilitating, magically fueled linguistic facility, and gifted with three omnipotent but unpredictable words of power by Ramachni; Thasha Isiq, the proud daughter of an admiral, who carries a magical burden of her own, and whose affections are torn between Pazel and the handsome surgeon's mate, the flamboyantly named Greysan Fulbreech; Captain Nilius Rose, a ghost-haunted madman, sadist, and seafaring genius; Felthrup Stargraven, a rat awakened to sentience (see below); various representatives of the *ixchel* race, tiny humanoids viewed as little more than vermin by most humans, and especially most sailors; Sandor Ott, a grizzled assassin and Machiavellian schemer; his most talented pupil, and now committed enemy, Hercól, who protects Thasha; Pazel's fellow tarboy, Neeps, whose fists fly more quickly than his thoughts; Arunis, consumed with overweening ambition; Pazel's long-lost sister, Neda, who has become a soldier-priestess of an enemy nation and now must ruthlessly squelch her love for Pazel; the list goes on and on.

Despite the large (and seemingly ever-growing) cast of characters, Pazel and Thasha are the emotional center of this book, even more so than was the case with the previous two. The focus is not just their feelings for each other, complicated by the dashing—perhaps a bit too dashing—Fulbreech, but shocking secrets dredged up from their pasts that emerge to devastating effect. All of this is in service to Redick's plot, which is as it should be—but at the same time, there is a sense that these and other characters are bigger than the plot—bigger than the book that contains them. That's how alive these characters are; they seem in danger of escaping the page. And it seems to me that such characters harken back to our earliest experiences of reading, and our painful discovery that the flimsy page is yet a boundary impenetrable to all but imagination.

The second element that distinguishes these books is an inspired bit of world-building. It seems little more than a cool fillip at first, but it comes to have profound, far-reaching, deeply moving significance. In Alifros, for reasons that no one entirely understands—but which seem related to ancient sorceries involving the Nilstone and Erithusmé, a legendary sorceress who, for a time, wielded the talisman without succumbing entirely to its corrupting power—animals spontaneously and randomly emerge from the fog of instinct into human-like reason and self-awareness. These awakened creatures are viewed by most humans with suspicion, if not outright loathing. They must keep their true natures hidden from all but a chosen few lest they be enslaved, tortured, or killed. Attacked or shunned by their own kind, who sense their difference without comprehending its nature, they are in any case unable to bear an association for which their minds, at least, are no longer suited. Yet they must also be wary of revealing themselves to humans and other awakened animals. These unfortunately blessed beasts live furtive, lonely, and all too often brief and violently concluded lives. Little wonder that many of them go mad.

The awakened rat Felthrup Stargraven is one of Redick's most memorable creations. Within his maimed body—his fellow rats attempted to murder him—Felthrup has a noble and capacious soul. An adventurer and scholar, a brave and loyal—if loquacious—friend, this diminutive hero hunts Arunis in his dreams, traveling at considerable hazard through the eponymous River of Shadows, a kind of stream of consciousness joining all worlds and dimensions where consciousness exists, in search of knowledge to use against him. Felthrup is the most important but far from the only awakened animal to play a significant role in the events of the series.

Redick upped the ante of the awakenings in the last volume, *The Ruling Sea*, in which the phenomenon was unexpectedly applied to human beings, albeit in reverse. Having sailed the *Chathrand* across a mystical barrier and into the uncharted waters of Alifros's southern hemisphere, our heroes encountered a non-human race, the dlömu, who once lived alongside humans...until a plague systematically robbed every last human of sentience.

*The River of Shadows* picks up from that shocking discovery and further elaborates it. The dlömu regard these new humans from the north as monstrous freaks of nature or as harbingers of divine retribution for their sins against the humans of their own land—for the dlömu relegated humans to little more than slaves, and in fact grew so dependent upon their servitude that, deprived of it, their empire has become decadent and warlike, able to sustain itself only through rapacious conquest: a conquest fueled by a loathsome magic every bit as corrupting, if not as potent, as the Nilstone.

Worse, the empire of the dlömu has fallen under the sway of a society of sorcerers led by Arunis—who, it's revealed, was originally sent north by that society in quest of the Nilstone. Arunis, who has been hiding aboard the *Chathrand* while he schemes to free the Nilstone from the grasp of his defeated pawn, the Shaggat Ness, paralyzed by one of Pazel's words of power, may now look ashore for allies in his unholy quest.

Worst of all, at least to Pazel and his friends, is the discovery that one of their own number bears an unmistakable early sign of the plague that rendered human sentience extinct throughout the southern hemisphere. There is, as well, an intimation that the awakening of animals and the loss of awareness in humans are related—as if sentience is a zero-sum game, and to bestow it on one creature necessarily involves robbing it from another. Are the bestial humans of the south the price exacted for awakened animals like Felthrup in the north? What are the moral implications of such a bargain—one imposed through the agency, it seems, of a magic that twists even the noblest intent to evil? And are these irruptions and disruptions of consciousness related to the River of Shadows? Redick explores these weighty questions not by abstract philosophical speculation but through the vivid emotions and actions of his characters.

The thing is, just as those characters are bigger than the roles reserved for them in Redick's plot, so, too, are the speculative implications of his world-building grander than the rickety genre framework underlying them. Hence the creative tension mentioned above. A lesser work may model itself upon a greater, with the result being a perception of diminishment—again, think of Brooks and Tolkien. But here we have a greater work that seeks to squeeze itself into the form of something lesser, as if Tolkien had taken Brooks as his model, rather than the other way around. It's a fascinating, stimulating, at times frustrating process—but out of it has come one of the most distinctive and appealing epic fantasies of the last decade. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

A very different dynamic is at work in ***The Enterprise of Death*** **(Orbit, trade paperback, 458 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-0-3160-8734-6)**, Jesse Bullington's outrageously entertaining and impressively original second novel, an exuberant mashup of horror, epic fantasy, and alternate history. The title refers both to the business of death—all of the main characters, in one way or another, are involved in this business, whether as mercenaries, physicians, or necromancers—and to the fierce initiative demonstrated by death, or those in its surprisingly ambiguous grip, to forge an existence that is not merely the absence or negation of life but rather a kind of anti-life, or death-in-life. Where Redick works hard to hit all the touchstones of epic fantasy, grounding his novel in the familiar, Bullington works equally hard—in places, I think, too hard, of which more below—to subvert the touchstones of his chosen genres, giving his novel the iconoclastic feel of a secret history. At its best, it's a genuinely creepy yet also quite amusing and at times unexpectedly moving tour de force stitched together from cleverly reimagined and updated tropes; the worst that can be said about it is that at times Bullington's relentless drive to be original results in a surfeit of wonders, some of which are unfortunately less thoroughly elaborated and well integrated than others: this is a book that, on the whole, as much as I loved it, left me hungry for less.

The novel begins in 1492, when the last Muslim city in Spain, Granada, was surrendered by its ruler, Abu 'abd-Allah Muhammad XII, or Boabdil, to the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella. The humiliated sultan exits the city, and ultimately Spain itself, leaving behind as hostage his beautiful daughter, whom Ferdinand promises to restore, somewhat the worse for wear, in exchange for a maiden of equal or greater beauty. The dithering Boabdil finally dispatches a young woman of peerless pulchritude, a vain and imperious harem girl named Omorose, to win his daughter's freedom. But the ship carrying Omorose, her guards, and her slaves is attacked by pirates and sunk off Gibraltar, leaving Omorose, a black African slave girl named Awa, and a eunuch, Halim, the only survivors. Upon reaching shore, half-drowned, the three are promptly captured by bandits who set out to take them to Granada, their original destination, there to be sold or ransomed.

The outlines of a more or less familiar plot are discernible here, and Bullington very skillfully manipulates readers' expectations in this regard, encouraging us to believe, without consciously considering the matter, that we are reading a certain kind of story, with a certain set of touchstones. Because he does this so well, when the supernatural suddenly erupts into his world, antic and grotesque as a cavorting skeleton in a lascivious *Danse Macabre*, readers are apt to be as flummoxed and horrified as his characters. It's tough these days to be genuinely frightened as a reader of

horror—blood and guts, demonic manifestations, sadism and other expressions of cruelty and evil: we've been trained to take them all ironically, or as mere entertainment, or even, à la Lovecraft, as a sort of gutter metaphor for more serious philosophical and existential concerns.

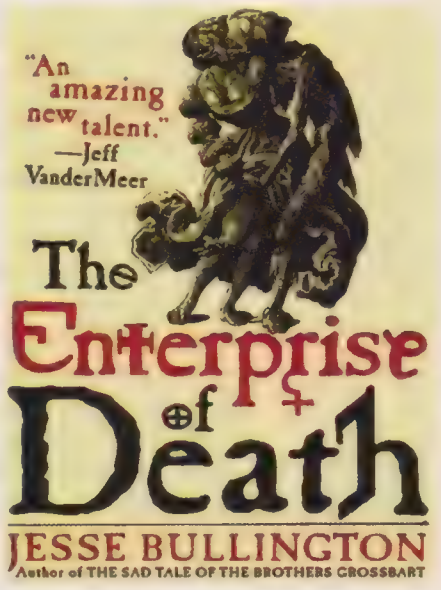
Bullington isn't having any of that. His brand of horror is shocking because it is at once so over the top and so down and dirty. It's not without the elements listed above, but it comes at them from a fresh angle. The result is genuinely unsettling. Even its humor—and there's plenty of humor here, some of it dark indeed—is different from what we're accustomed to seeing in horror: it's not a compensatory or apotropaic laughter; on the contrary, it's gleefully wicked, not an amelioration of horror but an intensification of it.

Captured by a mad hermit who turns out to be a necromancer—the only name this sadistic and obscene hobgoblin of a character receives in the course of the novel—Awa, Omorose, and Halim are physically and psychologically tortured and manipulated into betraying each other. The necromancer has the power to kill at a touch, and to restore life as easily; he can also animate the dead, raising a personal slave army; browbeat the very elements to obey his commands; and, most disturbingly, repair any physical injury by preparing a meal composed of whatever injured body part or organ he wishes to restore, whether derived from the injured party or another, giving new meaning to the biblical injunction of "an eye for an eye." Thus, after Halim is killed (no spoiler here; death is often not the end of characters in this novel, but simply a new beginning), his tongue is fed to the corpse of the bandit chief who kidnapped him, and this shambling revenant inherits Halim's voice...and, it seems, some shred of his personality. Omorose, too, undergoes death and a peculiar series of resurrections, as does Awa—who ultimately becomes the necromancer's unwilling pupil.

The necromancer is an extraordinary creation. Demented yet cunning, aged far beyond the normal human span yet not immortal, and hence forever hungering for more life, this obscene and repulsive creature "cavorts amorously" with "the rankest of his undead" atop a "preserved bear corpse" in whose hollowed-out interior he sleeps. He is teaching Awa his secrets, or, rather, some of them, for reasons of his own—and she is smart enough herself to understand that—but she does not have any say in the matter, as he demonstrates to her repeatedly, and besides, there is always the hope that he may inadvertently give her some scrap of sorcerous knowledge she can use against him to win revenge and freedom.

The sections of the novel set in the necromancer's mountain hideaway are the most harrowing and intense. They are a laboratory of profane horror in which Bullington, like the necromancer himself, performs crazed experiments. Here we discover, along with Awa, what lies on the other side of madness and a love indistinguishable from it—for the young apprentice is a lesbian whose desires are fixed on the only suitable companion available—the somewhat preserved corpse of her former mistress, Omorose, restored to a kind of half life sufficient to return or at least respond to Awa's lust, loneliness, and inherent decency. Or so it seems.

But things are very seldom what they seem where the necromancer is concerned. And rather than raising a lover, Awa soon discovers that she's birthed an implacable enemy.


"An amazing new talent."
—Jeff VanderMeer
The Enterprise of Death
JESSE BULLINGTON
Author of THE SAD TALE OF THE BROTHERS GROSSBART

The structure of Bullington's novel is a bit messy and confusing at the start. He's not only got two narrative strands working, but they are separated by a substantial number of years, though this is not immediately apparent. The second strand concerns Niklaus Manuel Deutsch—a mercenary cum artist in the employ of Captain Albrecht von Stein. Von Stein, an amoral man whose "blunt face" conceals a shrewd if violent mind, has captured a witch—a young girl whose features are hooded so that she cannot seduce her captors—and Niklaus is put in charge of five other mercenaries and ordered to deliver the girl to the Andalusian border, where an inquisitor named Ashton Kahlert is waiting. (Didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition, did you?) Niklaus, who doesn't believe in witches, or the Inquisition, for that matter, and who is a decent man at heart, rebels when his men decide to rape the girl and, at great risk to himself, frees her. She, as will surprise no one, turns out to be Awa—an older Awa who has in the meantime absorbed many more of the necromancer's lessons and somehow managed to escape him.

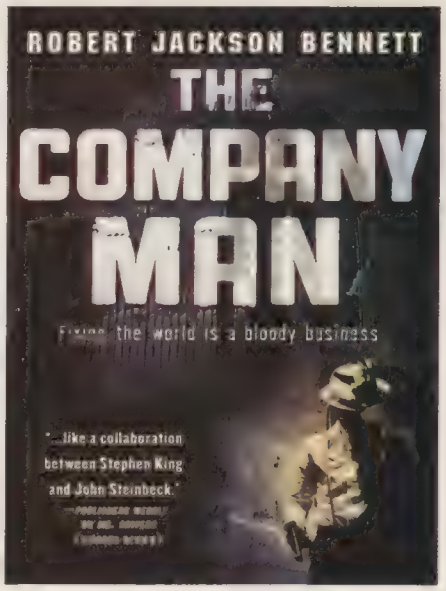
"Escape" is not precisely the right word, for it turns out that she is laboring under a powerful curse, and the necromancer is not done with her yet. The secret of breaking the curse may lie in the necromancer's hidden spellbook—and Awa has spent years in a fruitless search for this grimoire. But now the term of the curse is drawing to its end, leaving Awa faced with a prospect that is literally worse than death.

Awa and Niklaus become unlikely allies and friends, each loyal to something in themselves that is stubbornly better than what their lives have conditioned them to offer or expect: a kind of faith, if you will, though a humanistic rather than a godly one. This is the flip side of Bullington's dark focus. His main characters, shaped by their experiences in a violent world where ignorance and superstition allow evil forces, both natural and supernatural, to run wild, nevertheless retain an ability, however truncated, to trust, to love, to sacrifice on behalf of others. These virtues are of course less spectacular than the vices that he foregrounds, but they are what redeems his characters and what raises the novel itself above the merely clever and sensational (though it is both of those things).

From this point, the plot loses its claustrophobic intensity and takes on instead the charming but more leisurely pace of a picaresque novel—a bizarre one, to be sure—as Awa and Niklaus, in their desultory quest for the necromancer's grimoire, are surrounded by an attractive cast of secondary characters, including Niklaus's wife, Katharina, with whom he shares an open marriage; Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, aka Doctor Paracelsus, a physician with a rather unwholesome interest in witchcraft and the supernatural; and Monique, a lesbian mercenary of gargantuan size, ugliness, and sexual appetite—she is, needless to add, an immensely appealing character. There also some unpleasant characters, chief among them the aforementioned inquisitor, who takes on a much larger role. Through the relationships that come about in this section of the novel, Bullington explores what I think is his true subject: namely, in a fallen world, where does hope reside? And the simple answer to that question might be: in each other, or not at all.

It's only as the novel draws to a close that Bullington's touch loses some of its sureness, and he introduces riffs on other horror tropes that come across as out of place in the context of what has gone before. Not that the ideas themselves aren't cool—they are—but they cry out for novels of their own; relegating them to appendages of this one seems wasteful. But Bullington has painted himself into a corner plotwise, and he starts pulling all sorts of stuff out of thin air in order to bring his story to a satisfactory conclusion. It feels more than a little forced. Still, on the strength of this remarkable novel and its equally distinctive predecessor, *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart*, Bullington must be counted as one of the most original and exciting new talents to appear in years. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

Another second novel from a talented young writer is ***The Company Man*** **(Orbit, trade paperback, 472 pp., $13.99, ISBN: 978-0-3160-5470-6)**, Robert Jackson Bennett's follow-up to the critically acclaimed Mr. Shivers, a grimly mythic hunt through the Depression-era Dustbowl for a serial killer who might just be more than mortal. Like that novel, and *The Enterprise of Death,* Bennett's new novel is a literary mashup, with elements of horror, noir, cyberpunk, and science fiction sharing the




stage. But unlike Bullington, Bennett embraces ambiguity only so far: in the end, his novel comes down squarely as one thing and not another. Of course, I won't divulge that revelation, but I will say that I felt disappointed by it: both by the specific choice Bennett made and by his decision to make a choice at all. As long as this novel is juggling its possibilities, keeping its genre options not only open but mingled, it's superb; as soon as it decides to narrow those options to one, it loses something special

and becomes vastly more ordinary. That's a shame, not only because the story up until that point is so engrossing and original, but because Bennett's writing is of high quality throughout, and his three main characters are drawn with real sympathy and sophistication.

*The Company Man* is one of those alternate histories with a very specific departure point, at least overtly, from the history of the world we live in. That point is the Puget Sound in 1872, where lumber magnate William McNaughton, looking for a trade base, stumbles across an old hermit, one Lawrence Kulahee, a self-made genius who, in short order, will become known as "the Leonardo da Vinci of the nineteenth century." McNaughton acquires the rights to the unsophisticated Kulahee's inventions, past, present, and future, and from this partnership springs the McNaughton Corporation, a powerful industrial behemoth whose astonishing products quickly transform the United States and the rest of the world. McNaughton introduces such innovations as improvements to the pump and the locomotive but also heretofore unheard-of technologies like automobiles, passenger dirigibles, and advanced weaponry; they are even, as our main character, Cyril Hayes, will discover, working on a kind of instantaneous-communication system reminiscent of the ansibles so beloved of science fiction writers. By the time 1918 rolls around, the weight of McNaughton on the scales of history is sufficient to avert what in our reality became World War I; instead, a tense peace holds around the globe, one made possible by the balance of fear and greed engendered by McNaughton's evident access to technologies indistinguishable from magic. But are they—or, rather, what lies behind them—magic...or something darker, in a Lovecraftian sense, or, on the contrary, something brighter, à la Clarke or Heinlein? Such are the questions that Bennett juggles very skillfully indeed for most of his book.

The greatest invention of the McNaughton Corporation may well be the city of Evesden, built from scratch on the Puget Sound near the site of McNaughton's fabled encounter with Kulahee. This sprawling corporate headquarters houses thousands of the people who labor each day in McNaughton factories, as well as the many, many more who, like moths to a flame, have been drawn to Evesden by what seems the promise of a brighter tomorrow. But Evesden is no urban Eden...it's more like the seamy and steamy Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*: a culturally and economically stratified city being devoured from the inside out by its own success. And like that Los Angeles, Evesden is a town whose chickens are coming home to roost in a spectacularly bloody fashion.

Union troubles seem to be behind the beatings and murders that are increasingly testing the fragile patience of the city's civil authorities and, even more so, the McNaughton higher-ups who really pull the strings. In this, as in other aspects of his early twentieth-century American setting, Bennett is spot on; Evesden and all it represents may have ushered in the future fifty years early, but larger socio-economic trends hew to their previously established trajectories. In other words, underneath all the technology, Evesden is a typical American city of its time—that time being the golden age of unregulated capitalism and the corresponding rise of the labor movement.

A particularly gruesome mass murder—in which a subterranean trolley filled with eleven passengers rolls out of the dark and into a station no longer a trolley but an abattoir on wheels—suggests that something more than mere hooliganism is at work. Not just the indiscriminate violence of these murders, but their very impossibility—the window of opportunity for the killings to occur, the transit time between stations, is only on the order of minutes—leads to speculation that some dark science, or darker magic, known to McNaughton alone, is responsible.

Cyril Hayes works for McNaughton in an irregular capacity as a kind of fixer and problem-solver. He's a middle-aged man, a former resident of the British Empire who possesses a singular talent: freakish empathic powers verging on outright telepathy. The longer Hayes is in proximity to someone, the more accurate his appraisal of their emotions, state of mind, and even, in general terms, their thoughts. Unfortunately for Hayes, this ability does not come with an off switch, and the anguish of such forced intimacy over a lifetime has made him into a very tough cookie indeed, as well as a drunk and an opium addict. Although his previous assignment ended in a spectacular crack-up, present circumstances demand this loose cannon be given a second chance—and so Hayes is brought back into the fold and told to conduct interviews with McNaughton workers in order to ferret out any union plants.

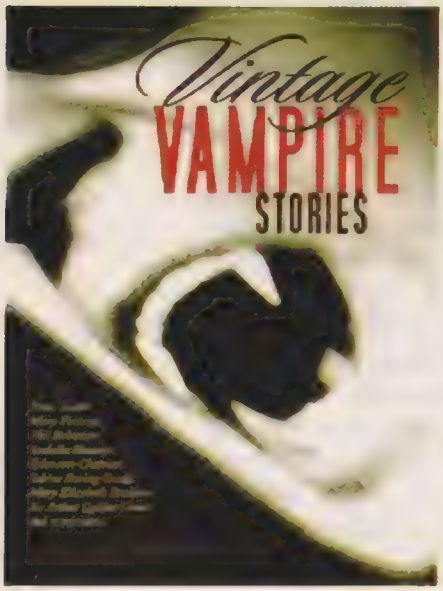
In this—his employers are desperate but not stupid—he is assisted by a "young but not too young" woman brought in specially for the task of keeping him on the straight and narrow: Miss Samantha Fairbanks, who is a bit of a tough cookie herself.

Meanwhile, Donald Garvey, a homicide detective on the Evesden force, is pursuing his own investigations. Garvey is divorced, a by-the-book cop who is somewhat isolated in a department where casual corruption and graft are the rule. Over the years, Garvey and Hayes have forged a relationship based on mutual respect; it's not quite friendship, but it may be as close to that as the two men are emotionally equipped to come. In any case, their respective investigations quickly converge.

Hayes is a character who slowly wins the reader's respect and almost grudging admiration on his own terms, without ever becoming one jot nicer or other than what he is: a dangerously undependable addict, albeit one who feels too deeply and has no other defense against that vulnerability. Garvey has a core of decency the city has not been able to efface, and Sam, a shrewd judge of character, and a forgiving one, is drawn to the gruff detective even as, quite unwillingly, she finds her sympathies engaged by Hayes...though he continues to irk and at times infuriate her.

The three characters are the points by which readers triangulate through the novel. Though there are mysteries to unravel—both traditional and otherwise—the force that holds the novel together, that keeps readers turning the pages, is the complex bond that comes to exist between Hayes, Garvey, and Sam.

Powerful but shadowy interests wish to impede Hayes and Garvey...or perhaps merely steer them toward a certain conclusion. For her part, Sam wishes to do the right thing, solve the crime, bring the killer or killers to justice, but also to protect two men who have become important and dear to her—in Garvey's case, quite a bit more than that. Meanwhile, other interests, equally shadowy and perhaps even more powerful—and less human—whisper to Hayes, sending tendrils of thought into his febrile mind from what seems to be a source somewhere beneath the city.




Bennett's rather conventional ending, hinging on the revelation alluded to above, may be disappointing, but in *The Company Man* he has created a vivid and compelling setting, and three characters that readers come to care deeply about. In my book, that goes down as a success. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

Finally, a collection that will be welcomed by scholars and casual readers alike: ***Vintage Vampire Stories*** **(Skyhorse Publishing, trade paperback, 318 pp., $12.95, ISBN: 978-1-6160-8234-5).** Editors Robert Eighteen-Bisang and Richard Dalby have done a superb job of putting together this anthology of sixteen vampire stories (plus one essay) written, with one exception, between 1863 and 1909 (that exception being a Chinese tale penned in 1679 but translated by a French scholar in 1913). Bram Stoker's Dracula, which deservedly stands as the granddaddy of vampire novels, was published in 1897; nine of the stories here (ten, counting the Chinese tale; or, actually, eleven, if we count the essay, "Vampyres and Ghouls," by Charles Dickens, Jr.) predate him. Thus, what's most fascinating about these literary resurrections of such all-but-forgotten writers as Mary Fortune, Dick Donovan, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon—all highly successful in their day—is the window they open onto the pop cultural ferment of the time, of which Dracula was only one, albeit the most famous and influential, product. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

This month we have a first novel and a pseudonymous first-time genre entry by an established mainstream author.

M. D. Lachlan's ***Wolfsangel*** **(Pyr, trade**

**paperback, 355 pp., $16.00, 978-1-6161-4357-2)** was published last year in the UK by Gollancz; the US edition is new as of April 2011. It's the first in a promised multi-volume saga following the adventures of an immortal Norse warrior descended from a god (which warrior and which god in particular is something of a plot point, so I will not reveal it here) through multiple incarnations as he seeks to avenge a wrong committed upon him and regain his true love. Pretty standard stuff, as far as that goes, but this first installment is a richly world-built historical fantasy/*Bildungsroman* set deep in the Northlands of the Sagas—a particular delight of mine, as it happens

(That's *Wolfs-an-gul*, the barbed heraldic device, by the way, and not *Wolfs-ang-el*, as in an Abrahamic messenger of God.)

Lachlan excels at evoking 800 AD (or thereabouts) in terms of culture, and his characterizations, while not overly complex, are strong. He produces two likable protagonists in the persons of twin brothers, separated at birth, and while for the first half of the book the plot is rather sparse, the cultural insights are strong enough to carry a reader through. He does a particularly good job with illuminating the premodern motivations of his characters, and while his tendency to thriller-omniscient is occasionally distracting, he handles it well, in general. He also does a good job of catching the flavor of the times, with thunderous larger than life braggarts sharing the page with simple men and women trying to make a living in a harsh world.

I could not, however, shake the feeling that Lachlan had a literary stop watch and was making sure there was at least one epic setpiece battle every fifty pages. They are all very well-written battles, I hasten to add, but the book would have benefited from tighter plotting at the expense of some of the random swordplay.

At about the halfway point, the book takes a turn for the more tightly plotted, as several previously rambling threads draw together—and the reason for much of the stage-setting becomes apparent. Unfortunately, once the book gets started rolling downhill, Lachlan rather loses control of it, and the last hundred pages are a bit of a muddle—with a twist ending that was a little too predictable for me. Still, for those who like their epic fantasy to include an exhaustively researched window to another time, this could be a satisfying read. **Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.**

Genevieve Valentine's debut, ***Mechanique: a Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*** **(Prime Books, trade paperback, 320 pp., $14.95, 978-1-6070-1253-5)** could not be a more different book. Where *Wolfsangel* reeks of the distant past, *Mechanique* is set in a magical, post-apocalyptic future in which a circus of magical, immortal, mechanical men and women wends its way through a barren landscape between cities torn by a ceaseless war—a war so old and so complicated that everybody has pretty much stopped paying attention to it.

This is a beautiful little jewel of a book, told in scintillating little flashes like light through the facets of a gem. It offers unreliable point of view, an omniscient narrator who almost dissolves into the narrative, and a series of striking, fantastic images that only slowly reveal the shape of the story behind them. It's beautifully written from the sentence level to the structural, but I have a sense it's not for everyone: it will take a patient reader to tease out the story, which is doled out without apparent urgency—until the very end. If *Wolfsangel* struggles in the last hundred pages, then *Mechanique* comes together there, suddenly clicking along like a merry clockwork at a tremendous rate of speed.

The book revolves around a pair of mysteries—a death, and a near-death—and the question of what will become of a pair of mechanical wings. The characters are all performers in the circus of the title, and most of them have been somehow enhanced with a magical technology—copper bones for the aerialists, iron tendons for the strongman—that plays with the tropes of both steampunk and cyberpunk without ever quite duplicating either. The protagonist—well, that's an interesting question. Because the main viewpoint character is a charming but very passive young fellow, and I'm not sure it's exactly fair to call him a protagonist. He serves more as an observer, somebody who helps the reader put the puzzle pieces together. **Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.**

## by Elizabeth Bear

Nnedi Okorafor's ***Akata Witch (Viking Juvenile, hardcover, 349 pp., $17.99, 978-0-6700-1196-4)*** is not what most people think of when they think of urban fantasy. But it is undeniably a fantasy, and contemporary, and it takes place largely in towns—it's just that the towns in question are in Africa.

One of the chief delights of this book is Okorafor's aptly named protagonist, Sunny, an albino American girl of Nigerian parentage whose family has moved home with her in tow. She's a complete fish out of water, torn between two worlds and two identities, when abruptly she is told that she is actually a person of great magical potential who has a terrifying destiny to fulfill.

I also really enjoyed this book's inventive, fluid world-building. The rewards system is great, and Sunny's training experiences vividly imagined (they take place in a sort of weird otherworld)—as is her complicated home life and family. Okorafor's people are *people*, warm and funny and sometimes deeply irritating to one another, and I found them engaging and uncaricatured.

I'm a firm believer that so-called young adult fiction can be enjoyed by all ages, which is why I keep reviewing it here, and it seems to me that one of the key points of successful genre Y.A. lies in creating a world that the reader wants to inhabit. I wanted to go to Sunny's world and learn magic along with her. (As a pale-skinned, heat-sensitive, easily sun-sick person myself—and one who spent several years in a torrid desert—I was especially jealous of the sun-immunity conferred by her magic powers. Now *there* is a superpower I could use in daily life!)

Okorafor is a sprightly writer rather than a deeply sensuous one, and she keeps the narrative charging along as Sunny is introduced to her powers (and the people who will be her allies), learns to use them, and faces her arch nemesis—all the while avoiding her meddling parents in the classic style of young wizards from the works of Diana Wynne Jones to Diane Duane. If I had one complaint about this book, it's that Sunny's way is just a little too magically smoothed—she's guided and challenged, but she's also repeatedly told how special she is, and many things come easily to her.

Her voice rings absolutely true, however, and I think this book is a big step forward for Okorafor in terms of tightness of plotting. I liked it a lot.

I was not as taken with Rudy Rucker's ***Jim and the Flims*** **(Night Shade Books, hardcover, 256 pp., $24.99, 978-1-5978-0280-2)**, which I suspect I am the wrong gender and the wrong generation for. It's another entry in the sparse, noncontiguous, and nameless fantastic subgenre in which surreal slacker/stoner/surfer/freaks save the universe, usually by doing drugs. (Chester Anderson's *The Butterfly Kid* is my favorite example of the genre; see also Michael Moorcock's *Jerry Cornelius*; and *The Invisibles, Scott Pilgrim, The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad*, et al).

I'm tempted to consider the subgenre an American and British manifestation of magic realism, mostly based on the general phlegmatic well-shucks-I-guess-the-world-is-weird reaction that characters tend to have to the numinous in these texts. Nobody's less likely to be shocked by psychedelic manifestations of the otherworld than people who put beer on their Cheerios, it seems.

This wasn't my favorite of its type, but it did have many things to recommend it and I think it might be of interest to readers who are older, or male, or less irritated by self-involved male slackers with erratic tempers than am I. In the book's defense, Rucker's too good a writer to fall into the trap of excusing Jim's behavior. To observe something is not the same thing as to condone it.

The protagonist, Jim, is a pretty typical

beach bum/dropout, except in that he's really a thoroughly unlikable human being of the tire-slashing, company-picnic-gastronomic-prank-playing type. His wife is however wonderful, and when she dies senselessly (and mysteriously) along with her unborn child, it serves as a powerful motivator for the reader—and Jim—to start solving the mystery of her demise.

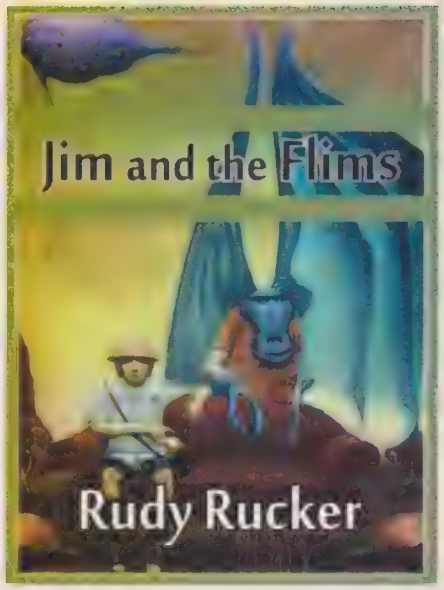
Which of course, this being the sort of book it is, turns out to be psychedelic invaders from beyond space and time.

In this case, ethereal jellyfish/turnip things, and blue baboons. (Why are invaders from beyond space and time so often blue? *The Butterfly Kid* had giant blue lobsters, as I recall.)

There's a weird otherworld—as richly developed and intriguing as the weird otherworld in Okorafor's book, and about twice as weird!—and a couple of nice double-crosses. Good guys are not immediately identifiable from bad guys, and side-switching is not a forgone conclusion as the mystery plays out and more information becomes available. The plot development with the sprinkles is so horrible and so underplayed I couldn't believe Rucker didn't work it to death, but he kept it nicely subtle—and it was very sad, once I paused to think about it for a minute.

Rucker's writing is also often a joy on a sentence and paragraph level. It's sharply observed, with an eye for the odd, and he gives Jim a strong first-person narrator voice.

This book's finest hour is its loving portrait of Santa Cruz. Rucker gives us sun-drenched hippie California in all its wacky finery. I could almost smell the eucalyptus and taste the gelato, and feel the burn of the cold Pacific on my skin. This is a book as richly steeped in place as Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks*. It made me want to learn to surf, and I have never had any urge whatsoever to take up surfing. It even made me miss the California sun, and—as I mentioned above—I get sun-sick and burn in heartbeats.

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# Young Adult Fiction

by Michael M. Jones

***Huntress*, by Malinda Lo, Little, Brown, hardcover, 372 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-3160-4007-5.**

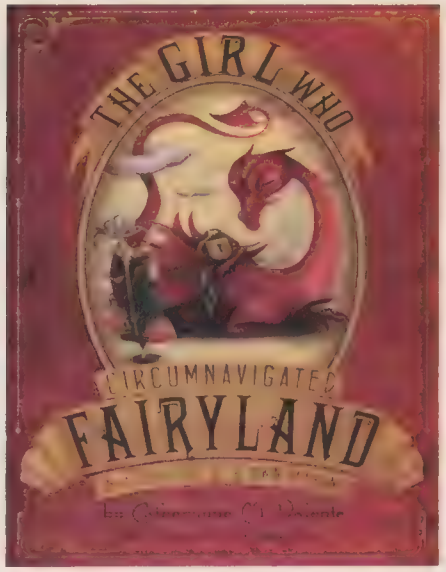
The Kingdom has been in upheaval for years, plagued by bizarre weather, failing crops, and unnatural creatures. An emissary from the Fae invites human representatives to meet with their Queen, to restore the balance. Among those who are chosen are Kaede, daughter of the Chancellor, and Taisin, a powerful sage-in-training. The perils of the road are many, and slowly the two girls fall for one another, a bond which proves life-saving when they confront the true threat to two kingdoms. This gorgeous fantasy combines heart-pounding adventure and gentle romance. Filled with lush imagery and lovely words, it's a genuine treat.

***Eona*, by Alison Goodman, Viking, hardcover, 656 pp., $19.99, ISBN 978-0-6700-6311-6.**

On the run after the death of the Emperor and the slaughter of her fellow Dragoneyes, Eona is caught in the middle of a rebellion, both figurehead and target. Only one man can teach her how to use her new powers in time to save the empire: Lord Ido, the disgraced Dragoneye who engineered his fellows' downfall, currently held captive by the wicked false Emperor Sethon. In an epic struggle for survival, Eona must rescue her enemy, master her abilities, and unlock a centuries-old mystery involving her own ancestor. This fascinating sequel to *Eon* combines Chinese myth, wuxia action, magic, romance, and gender issues, producing a densely packed, richly told story.

***The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, by Catherynne M. Valente, Feiwel & Friends, hardcover, 256 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-3126-4961-6.**

In this hypnotic, oft-dazzling homage to old-school children's fantasy such as *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, Valente both embraces and




subverts genre tropes. September, a resourceful girl from Nebraska, is whisked away to Fairyland one day. There, she enjoys a series of perilous and whimsical adventures, including questing for magical artifacts and defying a tyrannical ruler. With strange new friends at her side, September sets off to save Fairyland, embracing her own strengths and weaknesses. Complex and beautiful, lyrical and poignant, this tale is an instant classic.

***Red Glove*, by Holly Black, Margaret K. McElderry, hardcover, 366 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-1-4424-0339-0.**

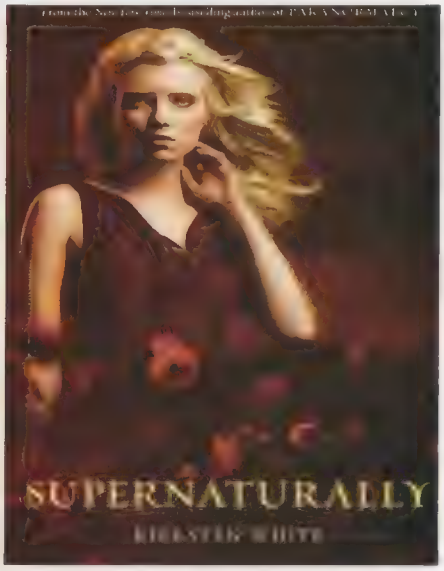
Cassel Sharpe has problems: The girl he wants has been cursed to love him against her will, he's secretly a powerful curse worker, and his family has been using him without his knowledge. Extricating himself from this mess will take some doing, and that's before the Feds pull him in to help investigate and avenge his brother's murder. Unfortunately, he's short on people he can trust, torn between family and the law, and running out of time. Intricately plotted and full of sharp turns, this is one twisted tale of magical crime and punishment, mixing urban fantasy with a hint of noir.

***The Girl in the Steel Corset*, by Kady Cross, Harlequin Teen, hardcover, 480 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-3732-1033-6.**

Finlay Jayne is a young woman with a secret: a dark side which exhibits a violent streak and superhuman strength. On the run from a previous employer, she's rescued by Duke Griffin King, who, like his friends, possesses unusual powers. Even as they try to understand Finlay's true nature, the small group struggles with internal turmoil and external threats, locked into a game of wits with the insidious Mechanist. In this quirky, exciting vision of an alternate

Victorian England, automatons and dirigibles mix with superpowers and teen drama. With its comic book elements, steampunk trappings, and romance sensibilities, this playful adventure marks the start of a fun new series.

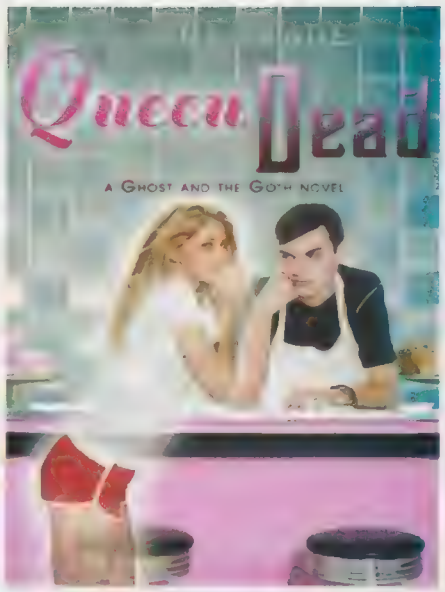
***Supernaturally*, by Kiersten White, HarperTeen, trade paperback, 352 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-0619-8586-7.**




Evie's attempts to lead a normal high school life after quitting her job with the International Paranormal Containment Agency seem doomed to failure when paranormals start attacking her at random, and her old boss all but begs her to come back as a freelancer, much to the dismay of Evie's shapeshifter boyfriend. Unable to turn her back on friends and duty, Evie tries to balance the aspects of her life with little success. Now she's dealing with fairies again, learning more about her past than she ever expected, and up to her eyeballs in trouble. Though a bit angsty, Evie's an enjoyable heroine, and her fast-paced Buffyesque adventures make for a good read.

***Born at Midnight*, by C. C. Hunter, St. Martin's Griffin, trade paperback, 406 pp., $9.99, ISBN 978-0-3126-2467-5.**

When Kylie Galen is sent to Shadows Fall, a camp for troubled teens, she figures it's because she screwed up once too often. The truth is, it's secretly a camp for supernatural teenagers learning how to control their natures and fit in. However, Kylie isn't supernatural, or so she thinks. As she gets to know her fellow campers, she discovers the truth of her heritage, even as she juggles her attraction to a werewolf she's known for years, and a half-Fae boy whose charm is irresistible. There's trouble afoot at the camp, and Kylie may be the key to fixing things. With a memorable narrative voice and an entertaining setup, this coming-of-age romp is a breath of fresh air.




***Queen of the Dead*, by Stacey Kade, Hyperion, hardcover, 272 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-1-4231-3467-1.**

Will is a Goth who sees ghosts. Alona is a cheerleader who met an early demise. They've forged an awkward relationship built on opposites attracting and cooperation, which serves them well as they help other ghosts gain closure. But now there's a new girl mucking things up, and she introduces Will to an entire society of ghost whisperers. While they provide him with insight into his abilities, they don't seem all that altruistic. Meanwhile, Alona becomes trapped in the body of a comatose friend, a fate worse than death. It's time for them both to figure out what they really want. This charming romantic comedy has surprising depths, and plenty of soul.

***Always a Witch*, by Carolyn MacCullough, Clarion Books, hardcover, 288 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-5472-2485-5)**

After years of being the only mundane in a clan of witches, Tamsin Greene has discovered her own potent set of Talents, along with a prophecy that puts her at the heart of her family's destiny. When her enemy, Alistair Knight, journeys back in time, Tamsin follows in order to thwart his plans to change the past. As she goes undercover in the stronghold of a rival family of witches, she tries to avoid their wicked ways while recruiting her own ancestors. Ultimately, Tamsin's actions in the past will influence generations to come, and decide her own fate. While the tale spans centuries and affects entire families, it wraps up Tamsin's personal story in a satisfying manner.

# Graphic Novels

by Andrew Wheeler

All of us who read and love fantasy know the infantilizing impulse: that cock of the head or raised eyebrow—less common now, luckily, post-Harry Potter and *The Lord of the Rings* movies—from mundanes who assume that, since *they're* adults who don't read fantasy, no real adults actually read fantasy. Comics have the same problem, though even more so: a big fat novel just looks more impressive than a book with lots of pictures, no matter how gorgeous and detailed they are. And so we might find ourselves doubly shunning fantasy graphic novels for younger readers—they signpost so many of the things that we wish we weren't defensive about. But, if we're firm enough, we can fight through and enjoy great books like these:

***Lost & Found: Three by Shaun Tan*, by Shaun Tan; "The Rabbits," written by John Marsden; Arthur A. Levine Books, hardcover, 128 pp., $21.99, ISBN 978-0-5452-2924-1.**

Shaun Tan's last book was *The Arrival*, a magnificent wordless graphic novel that wasn't exactly fantasy—there were no really clear supernatural elements—but also was absolutely set in a world that wasn't ours, and told a story that was fantastic in all the best ways. In the wake of the success of *The Arrival*—and of the Oscar-winning short film *The Lost Thing*, which Tan worked on as director, writer, designer, and artist—Tan's US publisher has brought back three of his earlier books, which had limited or no US distribution, under one cover.

*Lost & Found* moves reverse-chronologically, beginning with 2001's "The Red Tree" (a quiet, philosophical story with a poetic turn of phrase that functions as something like a meditative book for pre-teens), continuing through 2000's "The Lost Thing" (the source of the movie, a visually inventive story of one boy, the thing he found, and the question of where we all belong), and ending with 1998's "The Rabbits" (written by John Marsden, with brilliantly caricatured art from Tan, a fable of the conquest of their native Australia by Westerners). The three stories are very different in tone and feeling, from the melancholy of "The Red Tree," to the thoughtful whimsy of "The Lost Thing," to the dispassionate loss of "The Rabbits." All three are unified by Tan's painted art, always subtle,

engaging, and intrinsically devoted to telling that particular story.

These stories are more picture books than graphic novels—though "The Lost Thing" definitely has panels and captions, and can be seen as a transition to *The Arrival*—but they're also fine work by a great storyteller. And fantasy readers should be wary of all labels—comics, "kids' stuff"—that gets between them and great stories.

***Anya's Ghost*, by Vera Brosgol, First Second, paperback, 224 pp., $15.99, ISBN 978-1-5964-3552-0.**

Vera Brosgol, on the other hand, has no history: she's done a few short comics stories—mostly in the *Flight* anthologies—and *Anya's Ghost* is her first book. But it's remarkably assured, a two-hundred-plus page story paced carefully and drawn in a crisp animation-inspired style.

Anya is a young teenager with enough problems already: she's unhappy at the third-worst private school in the state, with just one friend, the semi-burnout Siobhan; she's trying to watch her weight, but her Russian-immigrant mother worries that she's not fat *enough*; and the boy she secretly likes, Sean, is going out with Elizabeth, a slim blonde with perfect skin. But when she falls down an old well in the park one day, she discovers something else: Emily, the ghost of a girl who was murdered ninety years earlier.

Emily wants to be Anya's best friend, and will do anything to help her out: whisper the right test answers into her ear, find out what Sean really likes, and give her confidence. But when Anya—feeling guilty that she'd never mentioned finding Emily's bones at the bottom of that well—tries to solve Emily's murder, things

begin to change. And perhaps Emily's desire to be best friends forever is not as appealing as it once sounded.

Brosgol makes Anya a real, fallible, rounded character—she doesn't even ask Emily's name until well after she's rescued from the well, and is just as self-centered and quick to take an easy out as any real-world teenager. Emily, of course, has depth and secrets of her own, which come out the more Anya learns about her new "best friend." And even the secondary characters—Sean, Siobhan, even Dima, the Russian boy who Anya hates for acting like he's "fresh off the boat"—have depth and individuality.

The story Brosgol tells about Anya and Emily is specific in all the best ways: it's about the choices that particular people make, and how they can move forward and make better choices, when given a chance. It's an exceptionally strong story for a debut, and would have been a top-notch graphic novel even if Brosgol had been making comics for twenty years.

Realms of Fantasy
congratulates

Harlan Ellison

for co-winning the
2010 Nebula Award
for Best Story

"How Interesting: A Tiny Man"

This story appeared in
our February 2010 issue.

# Gaming Reviews

by Matt London and Matt Staggs

***The Mutant Epoch*, Outland Arts, Role-Playing Game, ISBN 978-0-9782-5852-8, softcover $27.99, PDF $12.99, www.outlandarts.com.**

In 2010, Wizards of the Coast rebooted TSR's classic science fantasy role-playing game Gamma World. While it was a fun game in its own right, there were many gamers, including myself, who felt it lacked some of the character and crunch of the original system. While the original Gamma World was never a "serious" game per se, the newest iteration of the title embraced a cartoonish aesthetic that did little to endear it to those of us who grew up playing the original edition. Characters were practically disposable, with powers constantly in flux between encounters. The rules were sparse, and the background scarcely developed. This new Gamma World seemed like a flimsy substitute destined for a one-off play session and quickly forgotten—which it was, at least in my gaming group.

Enter The Mutant Epoch, a game that, despite the lack of a TSR/Wizards of the Coast pedigree, could very well be the true spiritual successor of the original Gamma World. The Mutant Epoch is a science fantasy role-playing game of apocalyptic adventure where players assume the roles of humans, mutants, clones, mutant animals, and even stranger things, venturing forth into a world twisted by devastation into something terrifying and unrecognizable.

Character generation is resolved by making a few broad choices, supported by random die rolls referenced against tables. With just a few tosses of the dice, players can have a fully realized character, complete with background, social status, mutations, and more. Some people might find this a little off-putting, but in my opinion, randomizing the character generation process is a great way of generating a motley crew of adventurers quickly and with little fuss. The core mechanics of the system are easy enough. Most tasks are resolved by cross-indexing a selected attribute against a coded hazard level to get a percentage chance of success. Combat, similarly, is a breeze, with attackers rolling under a base chance to hit which is negatively modified by a defender's armor, natural or otherwise.

The world of The Mutant Epoch is highly detailed, with rules for ancient technology, mutations, disease, poison, vehicle combat, and more. In a word, it's exhaustive: there's enough material in this one single book to play a hundred sessions and never run out of steam. Furthermore, the game is supported by "The Society of Excavators," an online community devoted exclusively to The Mutant Epoch. Gamers looking for a stand-alone game system for wild science fiction adventuring would do well to consider The Mutant Epoch. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Red Tide: Adventure in a Crimson World*, Sine Nomine Publishing, Role-Playing Game, ISBN 978-1-9366-7307-0, hardcover $24.99, softcover $19.99, PDF $7.99, www.sinenomine-pub.com.**

Red Tide [Campaign Sourcebook and Sandbox Toolkit] is a fantasy campaign setting from Sine Nomine, a small publishing house undoubtedly already familiar to some gamers for its outstanding science fiction role-playing system Stars Without Number. While Stars Without Number was constructed around a more or less original homebrewed rules system, Red Tide is written for use with Labyrinth Lord or any other "basic edition" Dungeons & Dragons retro-clone.

The world of Red Tide is on the brink of annihilation. Over three hundred years ago a mysterious red mist appeared at the world's

edges, destroying everything it contacted. A small group of refugees from the world's nations fled to the Sunset Isles, an ancient chain of jungle islands inhabited by a vicious race of humanoids called the Shou. There, just a hundred miles away from the edge of the mist, humanity prepared to make a final stand. While most of their descendants now search for a way to stop the advancing red mist, some madmen and cultists actually worship it with the hope of hastening its arrival. Meanwhile, despite the threat of the mist and the ferocious Shou, the political intrigues of the old world continue in the new, with war a constant threat among the nations of the Sunset Isles.

This admittedly dark setting is well detailed, with numerous maps and notes devoted to the nations, people, magic, and monsters of the Sunset Isles. Especially notable is the inclusion of a unique new system for random ruin creation that enables a gamemaster to create a fully stocked dungeon with minimal preparation. Gamemasters who are comfortable with winging things a bit will probably find that Red Tide offers just the right amount of structure. It's a great example of sandbox campaign design: all of the elements needed for an adventure are included, but it's up to the gamemaster and players to put them together. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Black Bag Jobs*, *Cubicle 7*, Role-Playing Game, ISBN 978-0-8574-4032-7, softcover $24.99, PDF $14.99, shop.cubicle7store.com.**

Black Bag Jobs is a collection of six unrelated adventures written for Cubicle Seven's The Laundry role-playing game, based on Charles Stross's The Laundry Files novels (The Atrocity Archives, The Jennifer Morgue, and The Fuller Memorandum). For the uninitiated, Stross's books are best described as a blackly humorous hybrid of the British super-secret service and H. P. Lovecraft, in which civil servants must do battle against government bureaucracy and alien horror in equal measure.

These adventures pit hapless Laundry agents against Deep Ones, Shoggoths, and Dholes in exotic locales like the Hindu Kush, an oil rig, and even the surface of an alien world. In each case, there's been a breach in the wall between the normal world and the world of all things eldritch and squamous, and it's up to the players to patch things up.

All of the adventures included are fairly dangerous, and a couple of them could even destroy the universe should players muck them up. Like always, the Laundry's agents will be expected to save the world, and to do so under budget and with all proper paperwork signed and filed.

Like almost all of the other Cubicle 7 products I've had the pleasure to read, Black Bag Jobs is well written and evocatively illustrated. Creating an adventure that is properly "Strossian" must have been a difficult task, and author Gareth Hanrahan should be commended for his efforts. All six adventures manage to maintain a balance between serious horror and serious send-up, so much so that I found myself double-checking while reading them to see if Charles Stross himself had been involved in their creation. There can be no greater compliment than that. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Portal 2*, Valve Corporation, ESRB rating: E10+, $59.99, Formats available: Microsoft Windows, Mac OS X, Playstation 3, Xbox 360.**

Format reviewed: Playstation 3

Every once in a while, a game comes along that tries to do things a bit differently. In 2007, one such game was Portal, developed by the Valve Corporation, creators of Half-Life. Portal was a small game, play time running only 4-6 hours at most, but it innovated first person shooters in a couple of clever ways. First, no weapons. Since the early days of Doom, FPSs have been identified as the games in which players shoot a million enemies dead with very large guns. Titles such as Call of Duty, Fallout 3, and even Valve's own Half-Life have tried to do more with the format, but all still cling to the guns and bullets model. Portal rejected this notion completely, so instead of shotguns and bazookas, the player's only tool shoots portals, which fix to flat surfaces and allow the player to teleport between them. The game that emerges from this ingenious gameplay mechanic is filled with environmental puzzles requiring quick reflexes and a quicker mind. Portal takes players on a wild ride, first teaching different ways to utilize portals, and later testing that knowledge. It creates a series of glorious "aha!" moments in which players realize how to solve specific puzzles, filling the players with satisfaction. Because the game is so short, the momentum never slackens. Play is never tedious, and no part of the game seems padded. Each new puzzle expands upon the previous one.

The other way Portal distinguished itself was

the story and characters. The player character, a test subject named Chell, makes her way through a series of test chambers in the Aperture Science Laboratories, guided by a cold artificial intelligence GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disc Operating System). Over the course of the test chambers (each of which is a unique puzzle) it becomes apparent that GLaDOS is not telling Chell the whole truth, and when the final test chamber is complete, the AI rewards the hero with death by fire. Thinking quickly, Chell escapes the incinerator and travels behind the scenes of the test chambers, making her way to GLaDOS, who becomes progressively more unhinged as Chell nears her goal. Chell destroys GLaDOS's robot body and the entire facility. What really stands out is GLaDOS, a villain who is something of a cross between a nursery school teacher and HAL from 2001. Cold, darkly comic, GLaDOS is everything you would expect a sentient computer to be—utterly impatient with slow and meaty humans.

But that was the first Portal game. Even if the sequel was just an expansion pack of more test chambers, it would still warrant a high rating. Portal is one of those unique games that takes something familiar to all gamers and makes it unexpected. Limbo, Minecraft, and the games from Team Ico come to mind. So Portal deserves all the accolades it receives. Despite getting a free pass from most critics, the team at Valve chose to ramp up Portal in every way. Set hundreds of years after the first game, Portal 2 takes place in a dilapidated and overgrown Aperture Science facility. This sophisticated evolution of the visual design in the first game is eye-popping and fun, a sharp change from the simple antiseptic design of the original game. In one sequence, Chell revisits test chambers from the first game, a side-by-side comparison reveals how much things have changed.

In Portal 2, Chell wakes from cryogenic stasis and attempts to escape the facility with the help of a new companion, the AI Wheatley, a bumbling dope played note-perfect by Stephen Merchant, co-creator of The Office. Wheatley is a brilliantly conceived character. There is more to him than meets the eye, and even though he is new to Portal 2, it feels like he has been part of the story all along. GLaDOS is also back, and once again puts Chell through a series of deadly test chambers from which she must escape.

The stakes change midway through the game, forcing Chell and GLaDOS to work together to escape the vast underground facility. This is perhaps the game's most brilliant stroke. After years of anticipating an epic rematch with one of the most iconic video game villains ever, players become reluctant allies of their arch-nemesis.

Everything is bigger in Portal 2. The levels are expansive, the characters and relationships are more complex, and the story is deeper. Carefully paced, the plot can be broken down into three acts, the middle chapter serving as a flashback (although not in the cheesy sit-com way) which explores the history of Aperture Science. This prequel substory in a sequel is structurally reminiscent of the Robert De Niro sections of The Godfather Part II.

Portal 2 also introduces a new gameplay mechanic. Special paint can be poured on surfaces to make Chell leap into the air or run lightning fast. There are also bridges of light, lasers, tractor beams, and catapults that mix with portal gameplay. The results are brain-bending.

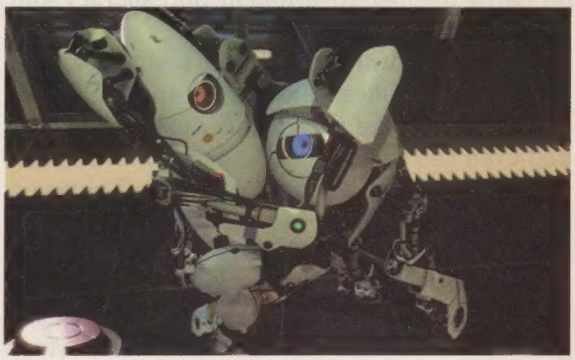
Another great addition is co-op mode, a two-player game completely separate from the main story, in which two cute androids must navigate a series of special test chambers designed by GLaDOS. In these puzzles, players must work together, sharing portals and using each other as tools to meet their objectives.

Although longer than the original, Portal 2 feels painfully short compared to many $60 titles. Criticizing such a well-made and well-paced game is something of a futile cause. "The only problem with the Wagyu beef was that there were only four ounces of it." Yes, but if you ate twelve ounces, you would probably get sick.

Like most second chapters, Portal 2 is darker and funnier than the original. Portal 2 feels complete and satisfying when you finish, which is more than most games can say with any price tag. If you are new to the world of Portal, grab the first game and then this one. It is never too late to play a great game.

9 out of 10.

**Reviewed by Matt London.**



Next issue
October 2011

Artists Gallery:
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Folkroots: The Myth and Magic of Narnia

Movies: A New Wave of Movies Inspired by Fairy Tales

Elizabeth Bear discusses the origins of Urban Fantasy

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